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ABSTRACT

This document examines three studies that explored additional support, retention, and guidance in England's urban colleges. The foreword and summary discuss the mission, focus, and results of each study. "Funding and Tracking Additional Support in Basic Skills and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages)" (Liz Lawson, Philida Shellekens) reports a study that identified the basic skills and ESOL needs of mainstream and disabled students. In "Retention of Students across Different Programmes" (Adjei Barwuah, Felicity Munday) describes and identifies reasons for variations in program retention rates. "Using Destinations Data to Improve Guidance and Support" (Muriel Green, Jackie Sadler), documents how colleges can improve their use of destinations data. The conclusion highlights key messages, common themes, and issues, including the following: additional funding needs, improved guidance, coherent strategies of early identification and follow-up, and the significance of the urban dimension. Seventeen tables/figures are included. Appended are the following: background to Further Education Funding Council funding of additional support; case studies of support of colleges and studies; checklist to help achieve effective support delivery and claim submission; student profiles by age, gender, and ethnicity; student questionnaire regarding guidance and progression after age 17; guidelines for establishing and managing a process to capture feedback from early leavers; and checklist for collecting and using destinations data to improve guidance and support. Contains 14 references. (MN)

FEDA Further Education Development Agency

Additional support, retention and guidance in urban colleges

Adjei Barwuah, Muriel Green and Liz Lawson

ED 414 493

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widening participation

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Additional support, retention and guidance in urban colleges

Adjei Barwuah, Muriel Green and Liz Lawson

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FEDA's **Widening Participation** programme helps providers respond to and implement the new widening participation agenda in order to improve the access, progress and success of all students, particularly those who have lacked opportunities to participate in post-school education.

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Foreword

Carol Burgess

The Urban Colleges Network was formed as the result of a conference organised by FEDA in October 1995 to examine issues of concern in urban colleges, in particular retention and achievement. At the end of the conference the delegates were so enthusiastic that they wished to continue discussing the issues that had been raised and to pursue further research to get more information. While it was clear that a lot of research had been done in the schools and university sector, there were only small pockets of research in further education.

We were delighted that FEDA was willing to work with us and to take on the research project. It was a unique project in that it had been commissioned by colleges across the country without any prompting from bodies such as the Department for Education and Employment or the Further Education Funding Council. Each college made available staff and statistics to contribute to the findings.

The research was drawn from individual colleges in certain key areas: London, East and West Midlands, the North, South East and South West.

After discussion among member colleges it was agreed to focus on four areas:

- learning support – tracking the achievement of learners with basic skill needs
- urban student drop-out on different courses and programmes
- guidance and progression at 17 plus
- evaluating diagnostic assessment and learning support strategies for bi-lingual students.

This publication reports on the findings of the first three projects. Work on the fourth project is continuing.

We were delighted with the co-operation which we received from all the 21 colleges across the country that have been involved in this project, together with the hard work and commitment of the researchers: Liz Lawson, Adjei Barwuah and Muriel Green.

As Chair of the Urban Colleges Network, I feel sure that there are many points of interest in this document, not least the clear lack of understanding across the sector about how to deal with the financial aspects of additional support, compared with the range of interesting developments in dealing with the curricular aspects. The reasons for drop-out are far more varied than we had anticipated, and do not always give us the answers that perhaps we had expected from anecdotal evidence.

This unique piece of national research helps us to identify key areas for attention. At a time when the Government is looking to widen participation and improve achievement, it is particularly welcome.

Carol Burgess
Principal and Chief Executive, Westminster College

Summary

Background to the projects

This publication reports on three projects undertaken by FEDA in conjunction with the Urban Colleges Network between October 1996 and October 1997. The colleges were concerned at high levels of student drop-out, especially in view of the FEFC funding implications, and were interested in any factors that might be specific to colleges in an urban environment.

Focus of each project

Each project addressed a particular aspect of retention and drop-out. The first looked at basic skills and ESOL additional support and examined how colleges are identifying and responding to students' support needs, systems for predicting and tracking additional support funding, and how they are calculating the costs of delivering additional support.

The second focused on student retention on a selected number of courses and programme areas, and explored reasons for drop-out. It assessed the varying degrees of student retention by programme, gender, ethnicity and age, identified reasons for the variations, and recommended strategies for addressing drop-out.

The third examined how colleges can collect and interpret data on student destinations and reasons for drop-out more effectively, and make improvements to their guidance and support systems in order to increase retention.

Additional support for basic skills and ESOL

Colleges in the project were positive about the FEFC's introduction of additional support funding as part of its funding methodology.

Identifying and responding to additional support needs

All project colleges undertook some form of initial screening and assessment of their students' basic skills and ESOL needs. Although colleges feel their procedures are improving, the assessment of second language speakers still needs development. A range of materials are in use, both commercial packages and in-house assessments. Staff views differ on the usefulness of different approaches and materials, in particular whether to use generic or subject-specific tests.

- The results of screening showed that large numbers of students are in need of additional support.
- The majority of the colleges are targeting full-time rather than part-time students because of resource and budget constraints.
- To meet demand, a shift of responsibility is needed from specialist to mainstream staff.
- All staff need to be aware of students' additional support needs and to be able to address these through their mainstream teaching.

Although colleges recognise the need to provide additional support in ways that are most appropriate to students' needs, in some cases their decisions are influenced by funding considerations and the need to satisfy FEFC requirements for claiming additional support units.

Tracking additional support

Efficient tracking systems are needed to monitor the effect of additional support provision and to claim funding. Most colleges use computerised systems with a range of different software packages and admit that their systems need further development. Integrated procedures are needed that set out clearly the data to be collected, timing and persons responsible.

Calculating and claiming additional support

Methods used for calculating additional support claims vary. Colleges have real concerns that different interpretations of the FEFC guidance result in some colleges being winners and others losers.

- Project colleges' claims range from 0.15% to 10% of their total FEFC funding.
- Colleges are worried that, even where claims are optimised, more students need support than can be funded from FEFC additional support units.
- Colleges with a low average level of funding (ALF) are concerned that the real value of their additional support units is reduced even though the costs of meeting their students' needs are as great as in high ALF colleges.
- Some colleges argued for the introduction of a standard hourly cost for additional support.

A whole-college approach

A whole-college approach is needed to delivering, tracking and claiming additional support, with stronger links between the staff involved in different stages of the process, and a strategic overview from management.

Student retention

Profile of students who drop out

Findings showed that in these urban colleges white students and older students are more likely to withdraw than other groups. Students applying late and those on intermediate- and foundation-level courses are more likely to drop out than those on advanced-level courses. A relatively small proportion of students leave for full-time employment; more leave for other full-time courses or for part-time employment. Younger students are more likely than older students to leave for another full-time course.

Factors affecting retention

- The most significant factors affecting retention are student commitment and motivation.
- Students who withdraw are more likely to want to progress to employment than to HE.
- Although students claim generally to be satisfied with the help they receive in choosing their course, staff considered that inappropriate aspirations and course choice are key reasons for drop-out.
- Inability to cope with course demands, low levels of ability, and poor language and key skills are seen as contributory factors.
- Students with poor attendance records at school and behavioural problems were considered more likely to drop out.
- A greater proportion of students who withdraw experience financial or personal difficulties, including family, travel and accommodation problems.
- Most students are not in paid employment. However, some work a significant number of hours and staff are concerned at the impact on their studies.
- More current students receive discretionary grants while more students who withdraw and older students receive benefits; the proportions receiving the Job Seekers' Allowance are broadly similar.

- The financial implications of progressing to HE and scepticism about the market value of a degree cause some students on advanced-level courses to leave.

Student opinions

- Although students have generally high opinions of different aspects of their experience at college, those who have dropped out tend to be more critical.
- Male students are generally less satisfied than female students, while 16- to 18-year-olds and, to a lesser extent 19- to 24-year-olds, are less satisfied than those who are over 25.
- Students who withdraw are significantly less satisfied with: their choice of course, timetable, quality of teaching and tutorials, helpfulness of teachers, help and advice on coursework, feedback on assignments, help in getting into university and with personal and financial problems. They also enjoy the course less and get on less well with other students.
- Overall, students comment most favourably on the social aspects, atmosphere, helpful and friendly teachers, and their course.

Improving retention

While most colleges have well-developed student services, the quality of tutoring and the effectiveness of referral systems are less consistent. Colleges' procedures for monitoring and following up student absences and identifying reasons for withdrawal vary in quality as do their strategies for improving retention.

Improving guidance and support

Collecting and using destinations data

This project confirms many of the findings from the previous project.

It demonstrates the importance of systematically collecting accurate and comprehensive data on student destinations. The majority of project colleges have fragmented, complex systems, often involving large numbers of

staff. Only one has a coherent and comprehensive whole-college system. In order to collect and exploit data efficiently, colleges need to ensure that all staff are clear about their own role and those of other staff. Information collected needs to be accurate and easily accessible to all those who need it. Collaboration with other agencies can help avoid duplication and increase the overall pool of information available.

Following up students

- In most colleges initial responsibility for following up students lies with course tutors. Colleges have particular concerns about the extent to which follow-up is taking place, whether documentation is being completed, and the accuracy of the information recorded.
- The selection and training of staff are essential as they can affect the accuracy of data collected, the veracity of student responses and the cost of the process. Follow-up can be particularly effective where trained administrative staff are used.
- Tracking down students, who can be very mobile in urban areas, is difficult. Contact needs to be made as soon as possible after the student has withdrawn and preferably during early evening. Staff need to be sensitive when calls are handled by other family members.
- The process of collecting information on leavers is resource intensive and can be expensive, even where administrative staff are used. In spite of this, colleges believe the overall gains outweigh the costs.

Trends in drop-out were difficult to establish; the two most commonly cited reasons were dissatisfaction with the course and travel problems. Other reasons included:

- incorrect expectations of the course
- lack of motivation
- poor attendance at school
- poor attendance at college
- failure to keep up with course work
- failure to return to college after breaks in the year

- students accepting places at more than one institution and withdrawing at the beginning of the course
- financial problems
- late start on the course
- dissatisfaction with college facilities.

Improving provision

Colleges recognise that they can take action to increase student retention through improving their guidance and support systems.

- Clear and integrated recruitment procedures, with minimum entry qualifications where appropriate, can help ensure students make the correct course choice.
- Induction should be available to all students regardless of when they join the college.
- There should also be opportunities for students who join late to catch up with work they have missed.
- Colleges should increase students' awareness of the support available to them. Tutorial systems and staff tutoring skills should be strengthened with training for staff where needed.
- Prompt and consistent responses are needed to non-attendance and to identifying and monitoring students 'at risk' in order to detect problems early.
- Progression guidance, procedures for students wanting to change course, and exit guidance for those wanting to withdraw should be available to all.

Common themes and issues emerging from the projects

- Colleges need to develop their information systems so that they can collect and record appropriate and accurate information, and make this available to all who need it.

- Curriculum, guidance and support staff, and those working in management information systems (MIS) all need to work together if information is to be gathered accurately, student need diagnosed and appropriate support provided.
- All colleges can take actions to develop the support and guidance they provide for students and improve retention. College research projects can identify where to target action in the institution.
- More staff need to be aware of the range of students' additional needs. They need to be able to diagnose and meet these needs, and refer students to specialist help where appropriate. In many cases colleges will need to devise staff development programmes to raise staff awareness and develop their skills.
- The quality of teaching and tutorial support is crucial in motivating, supporting and retaining students. In some cases staff will need to develop new approaches to teaching and learning, and new ways of delivering the curriculum to meet the needs and expectations of particular groups of students.
- Colleges need to respond strategically to the issue of student retention by identifying objectives and targets, formulating action plans and allocating appropriate resources.
- Colleges need to be aware both of funding opportunities and changes in benefit regulations if they are to maximise their own funding and enhance opportunities for students to attend college.

Although it is difficult to identify factors that are specific to urban colleges, certain issues raised by the research are more likely to affect students in urban areas. These include the opportunity for students to switch institutions if they get dissatisfied; the volatility of employment markets and the temptation to take up a job offer; the difficulties and expense of travelling across large cities; financial difficulties caused by the discretionary grant and benefit systems. There are also more ethnic minority students, including those with ESOL support needs, in urban colleges. However, the most important factor affecting completion of courses is the quality of the student experience of the teaching and support offered by the college.

Funding and tracking additional support in basic skills and ESOL

Chapter 1

Liz Lawson and Philida Shellekens

Introduction

This project focused on the basic skills and ESOL support needs of all students. Although support for students with disabilities or learning difficulties was not the main concern of the project, many of the findings will also be of interest to those who deliver or manage additional support for that group of learners.

The aims of the project were to:

- examine the relationship between students' support needs, the additional support delivered and the final funding claim for additional support
- investigate the models used to predict, track and claim additional support funding
- describe the methods used to calculate the cost of delivering additional support
- identify any shared problems or difficulties among participating colleges.

Following the incorporation of FE colleges in 1993, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) consulted the sector on the design of their new

funding system. Built into the methodology were additional support units which could be claimed for individual students and used to fund the specific identified individual needs of those students. (See Appendix A for further description of the funding methodology for additional support and details of changes in the methodology for 1997–8.)

Although research indicates that sector colleges are generally supportive of this aspect of the FEFC funding methodology, the preliminary stage of the FEDA project uncovered several areas of concern over the arrangements for predicting, tracking and claiming additional support. These worries were characterised by the following questions:

- How can we make sure that all the different players in the delivery, tracking and claiming of additional support understand each other's roles and talk to one another?
- How can we accurately cost the different aspects of additional support?
- Are some students missing out, just because their college is not 'optimising' its additional support claim?
- Can we claim for:
  - personal counselling to support students to stay on course
  - staff development
  - management time
  - developing material
  - database inputting?

The project set out to discover whether these questions reflected more widespread problems among the participating colleges or whether they were isolated queries which could easily be resolved through the sharing of information and good practice.

Project methodology

All participating colleges bar one were urban, inner-city colleges with a high proportion of part-time students, many of whom were on benefit. Large numbers of students in London colleges were asylum seekers and refugees. One college was a sixth-form college. After an initial investigation to establish colleges' main concerns about the funding and delivery of additional support, colleges were asked to complete a detailed postal survey which investigated:

- the relationship between student needs, support delivered and funding claim
- the detailed costing method used to calculate staff time, overheads and other aspects of additional support delivery
- the percentage of global college budgets represented by additional support funding
- the profile of additional support claims for the previous three years (where available)
- the models used to predict and track additional support
- the systems for ensuring management, academic staff and finance section involvement in tracking and claiming additional support
- the overall effectiveness, strengths and weaknesses of any information technology (IT) systems used for tracking additional support.

After the research was completed, FEDA was given access to a set of interviews carried out by the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) as part of a large-scale survey of FEFC funding. Comments on the additional support mechanism echoed those emerging from the FEDA project; one comment has been included here.

Overview of project findings

In considering the research findings, it is important to bear in mind the distinction between:

- basic skills and ESOL provision which represent the student's main learning goal
- individually listed qualifications in basic skills and ESOL that are additional to a student's primary learning goal
- additional support delivered to a student while on a mainstream course, such as an NVQ, GNVQ or A-level.

FEDA's research focused only on the third aspect of provision – additional support. Throughout the text, the term additional support has been used to describe support which is additional to the students' main programme. This support may or may not qualify for FEFC additional support funding.

It is also important to note that for certain questions in the survey, some colleges were only able to supply estimated numbers. The main reason for this was that many colleges were still refining mechanisms to collect accurate data on student numbers and take-up of provision. Where information has been estimated, this is indicated in the text.

Identifying and responding to additional support needs

Screening and assessing students: what colleges are doing

In the majority of colleges initial screening took place pre-entry or at induction, and diagnostic assessment took place at induction or as early as possible on-course, with the advantage that support could be set up at an early stage. However, three colleges were concerned that too much testing at an early stage might intimidate students. To counteract this, one college developed the system of screening at enrolment and integrating diagnostic assessment into the first course assignment.

There was evidence from earlier FEDA research that 70% of learners reported a loss of self-esteem after taking part in screening and assessment unless they were given immediate and positive feedback on their performance. Project participants agreed that systems need to provide sensitive and speedy feedback if they are to bolster confidence. This feedback helps students to develop positive attitudes towards the basic skills support they may need if they are to be successful on their learning programme.

The colleges participating in this study used the following screening and assessment materials:

- Basic Skills Agency screening tests
- Schonel spelling test
- Basingstoke test
- Level of English Proficiency (LOEP), part of the Accuplacer software package
- screening and assessments developed in-house, e.g. maths, numeracy, literacy, course-specific literacy assessments. One college made use of induction assignments which assessed basic skills in a course-specific context.

Some college staff were in favour of standardised assessment because it allowed for central monitoring; others suggested that subject-specific assessment would be more motivating and accurate. Participants agreed that these features need not necessarily be mutually exclusive. Subject-specific assessment activities could be designed to meet the communication and numeracy requirements of specific courses, providing they were referenced against agreed standards and used standardised marking schemes.

All project colleges felt that they were improving screening and assessment procedures. However, further improvements, particularly in relation to staff training and the development of subject-specific assessment materials, were identified as priorities. Participants also agreed that the assessment of second language speakers is generally inadequate and needs developing.

The following checklist was drawn up during the course of the research project. It is compatible with the formal criteria described in *Managing Assessment* (FEDA 1995) and identifies criteria for selecting screening and assessment materials.

Is the material:

- objective and reliable
- fair and non-threatening to the student
- relevant to the course of study
- easy to administer and mark
- efficient in terms of staff and student time
- cost effective
- able to provide meaningful information on the ability and needs of the students
- able to assess literacy, numeracy and second language needs at different levels
- able to provide a baseline to measure subsequent progress and value-added
- evaluated for its effectiveness?

Profile of students offered and taking up support

Table 1 gives an overview of the total number of students attending 11 of the 12 participating colleges and of those who had access to support. Please note that not all colleges were in a position to provide exact information, so the table is based in part on estimates, particularly in relation to part-time students.

The table shows that:

- 72% of the students enrolled on part-time and 28% on full-time courses.
- 35% of all students were estimated as needing support with literacy, numeracy and English as a second language.
- Support was delivered to 1,834 part-time and 5,115 full-time students. This is respectively 36% and 61% of the students who were assessed as needing it.
- 26% of part-time and 37% of full-time students had BS/ESOL support without support funding being claimed. This was either because the support was considered to form part of mainstream provision, or because it fell short of the banding thresholds.

Table 1 Profile of students offered support			
	No. of FT students (≤450 hrs)	No. of FT students (>450 hrs)	Total
Total number of students in all colleges	32,150	82,945	115,095
Students estimated (through recruitment, screening, etc.) as needing basic skills or ESOL learning support	12,281	28,298	40,579
Students assessed as needing basic skills or ESOL learning support	8,395	5,050	13,445
Students who have been offered basic skills or ESOL learning support	6,877	3,409	10,286
Students to whom basic skills or ESOL learning support has been delivered	5,115	1,834	6,949
Total number of basic skills or ESOL students for whom the college has claimed additional support units	3,038	1,350	4,388

Part-time students were far less likely to be offered, and have access to, learning support than full-time students. This was because budget and resource constraints had forced colleges to prioritise and most had decided to provide for full-time students.

Some colleges had a policy of providing for all students diagnosed as needing additional support, but three colleges provided additional support only to those students who were expected to trigger funding.

When it came to claiming funding units for additional support, the picture varied. The colleges which provided for all students diagnosed as needing support only claimed funding units for some students. One college reported that it submitted claims for 63% of its full-time students who had received support but did not claim for any part-time students. A second college claimed for 65% of full-timers who had received support and 85% of part-time students who had received support.

The colleges were also asked to select six courses and provide information on the reasons for students not being offered or not participating in additional support activities. An analysis of the data supplied by ten colleges indicated that, of the sample:

- 14% were not offered support because funding was not available
- 12% were not offered support because appropriate staff were not available
- 33% were offered support but were unwilling to participate
- 12% were offered support but were unable to participate due to timing or for other personal reasons
- 10% of the students dropped out of additional support at a later stage.

Methods of delivering additional support

Factors affecting support requirements and support delivery include:

- the nature of the learning programme
- the guided learning hours available to the student on-programme
- the staffing, space and resources allocation in the college
- the specialist skills of the support team.

No one mode of support is therefore suitable for all situations. Among project colleges the most widely used forms of delivery were double staffing, discrete classes and open learning centres. Colleges agreed that, however support was delivered, the integration of subject teaching and learning support is vital to student success.

There appears to be a tension between the need to provide additional basic skills support to large numbers of students in FE and the principle of individual additional support enshrined in the FEFC funding methodology. The logical need for group delivery of basic skills and ESOL support contrasts with the individual nature of the additional support claim. This contributed to the anxiety expressed by many colleges. There is confusion about what should be 'mainstream' funded through on-programme units and what should be considered 'additional'.

Implications for staff development of mainstream teachers

It was clear from the project colleges' experiences that the current level of need for additional support cannot be met by specialists alone. Mainstream teaching staff must be trained to deliver at least some aspects of learning support. If teachers are to feel truly confident about supporting students as part of their role, there must be significant investment in staff training and support. The qualitative and quantitative benefits of learning support have to be made clearer to subject tutors and to management if they are to accept the argument for this training.

Tracking additional support

The additional support cycle: roles and responsibilities

Table 2 summarises the methods and key stages used by participating colleges to predict and track the delivery of additional support. The last column provides information on the numbers of colleges involving specific types of staff in the collation of information for that stage of the process. For example, academic staff in all colleges were responsible for screening and induction.

Most colleges had allocated responsibility at management level for the processing of support claims and reported that this was an important aspect of the process. They were reasonably content with the communication between staff responsible for screening, tracking and support delivery. Some colleges, however, were concerned that their management and teaching staff had insufficient contact. They were keen to improve:

- definitions of roles, responsibilities and reporting lines
- identification and reporting of basic skills and ESOL needs across the college
- monitoring of offer and take-up of provision
- availability and quality of information on basic skills and ESOL support to course teams
- collection of audit evidence for support claims.

Table 2 The additional support cycle

Activity	Methods	Key stages		Staff involved	
Predict total units for following year's funding cycle	• statistical trend analysis, to inform strategic planning • agree targets to support delivery	Aug Feb	ISR/funding claims projections for the following year	management academic staff finance section	11 5 5
Establish which students need learning support	• interview/screening • diagnostic assessment (incl. free writing) • liasion with subject tutors	Sept April on continuous	enrolment/induction recruitment for the following year (self/tutor) referral	management academic staff finance section	3 12 0
Track students' use of learning support	• register/attendance/MIS checks (mostly paper records, but also on MIDAS)	ongoing/monthly audit end of year audit (in two colleges)		management academic staff finance section	6 10 2
Determine that the student has triggered the additional support band	• calculate student's consumption of support, using standard hourly cost and any extras	Sept ongoing	some colleges predict and adjust later most monitor throughout the year	management academic staff finance section	7 7 3
Collate additional units across the college	• mostly computerised trawl • some manual trawl	ongoing Nov/Feb/May May	most colleges one college two colleges	management academic staff finance staff	7 6 5
Claim for funding	• ISR and Annex A collation	Aug	end of year audit	management academic staff finance section	8 3 5

The colleges had assembled staff teams to deliver initial screening and assessment. The make-up of teams varied from college to college but between them they included the following range of staff: basic skills tutors, ESOL tutors, course tutors, staff at advice centres and learning access centres. Interestingly, some colleges were planning to try out each other's models for the new academic year, confirming that there is no single best method of screening or assessment.

Staff mostly relied on informal, personal contact rather than systems-based communication to pass on the results of screening and assessment.

Colleges highlighted the importance of the course tutor's role in collecting and disseminating information on learning support needs. Responses showed that:

- in seven of the 12 colleges course tutors had access to all information on student tracking of basic skills or ESOL support delivery; in three they had some information and in two they had none at all
- at three colleges course tutors were responsible for the collation and dissemination of information to all staff; in six they had some responsibility and in three they had none at all
- eight colleges had made sure that course tutors understood the implications of the funding mechanism for support costs.

Four colleges had opted to make the learning support tutor the central figure rather than the course tutor. This was, however, seen as a temporary measure until course tutors received training and support on learning support delivery. One college commented 'although some staff are unwilling to take on even more responsibility, the support becomes more effective where course tutors are fully involved'. Course tutors are in the unique position of having both an overview of groups of students and a knowledge of individual students with their particular learning needs. If course tutors are involved, provision is likely to be better co-ordinated, with basic skills and ESOL support clearly relating to the programme of learning. Additional support claims are also likely to be underpinned with better evidence.

Monitoring and tracking support

The project survey confirmed that most colleges had trouble collecting and accessing data on the use of additional support; they were still developing the necessary systems for data collection. Large numbers of students had received additional support, even though each individual had not necessarily received sufficient support to trigger the lowest threshold for funding. Ideally, the participating colleges needed software which was able to collect evidence for all students and retrospectively convert the take-up of additional support into unit claims. Only one of the colleges had such a system in place. (See Appendix B for a description of college B's system.)

Two colleges used a totally paper-based system to record delivery and take-up of additional support. Since they had relatively few support users, there was no need for computer assistance. The other colleges relied on paper registers and record sheets and used computer software to process the information. The colleges used a great variety of software packages: EXCEL, EARS, Connect, Midas, FEMIS, Wordperfect, Microsoft, and Pipistrel, as well as software developed in-house, for example:

> *At College 1 the co-ordinator and additional support tutor completed record sheets containing details of the first interview, attendance and student reviews. The records were held in the Learning Resource Centre. The Support Tracking System, designed in-house, tracked the number of support hours offered to individual students throughout the year. The software was only in its pilot phase but the college expected it to be very useful. MIDAS produced Annexe A claims and calculated finance.*

> *At College 2 logs of delivery and take-up of additional support were compiled throughout the year. The system was considered to be reasonably effective as long as all staff made accurate records. Data was collated manually and transferred to EXCEL. The third and last stage was the transfer to FEMIS. This stage was considered to be least user-friendly of the three.*

As these examples show, the colleges did not have simple systems for handling additional support data. Commonly cited problems included the transfer of information from paper to different types of software and the need to network across different sites. In some cases the introduction of new software had made the data less reliable because IT systems had proved to be incompatible.

Claiming for additional support

The project investigated the hypothesis that colleges work to very different models for prediction, data collation, calculation and claiming of additional learning support. This was supported by the findings of the project postal survey, which revealed that the participating colleges had a range of different ways of calculating their support claim.

Towards the end of the project, two conferences were organised which included a question-and-answer session on the FEFC methodology for claiming additional support. Questions from the floor supported the project finding that there is still confusion among sector colleges about the process of claiming additional support funding.

Some questioners asked for information about the funding mechanism for additional support, which implied that not everyone working in this area has adequate access to, or a working knowledge of, the written guidance contained in *How to Apply for Funding*. Others requested detailed interpretation of the written guidance, confirming that colleges and their auditors may well be interpreting the advice differently.

There was concern about the differences between colleges in their additional support claims. Colleges which had efficient systems for delivering and tracking learning support before incorporation are now able to 'optimise' their funding claim for additional support. Colleges which did not have much support in place before incorporation are now battling to set up efficient systems for delivering and tracking support at a time when college budgets are constrained by the removal of the Super Demand Led

Element (DLE). Colleges in this position, which may be teaching students with significant additional support needs, feel that they will never be able to catch up.

The following questions illustrate the range of concerns:

- How can we ensure that all teachers, including part-timers, have grasped the basics of the funding methodology and their implications for recording and delivery?
- How can additional support costs be *so* different from one college to another, even within the same geographical area?
- Are some students missing out, just because their college is not 'optimising' the additional support claim?
- How do we cover the support costs of the numerous students who need support but do not trigger the lowest threshold for claiming additional support?
- We have targeted a student for receiving additional support. The support is being delivered to a group. If the targeted student leaves the college, can members of the remaining group be used as the basis of the funding claim instead?

In the NATFHE interviews one middle manager reported:

> *we don't appear to have got anywhere near the right number of units for the work we do ... I don't know why. I'm still new at this and I'm still trying to find out because ... I know it is logged carefully and we do a lot of it.*

FEFC advises that precise interpretation of the guidance can only be based on an individual college's situation and the detailed evidence presented in support of the claim. Staff on the funding team at FEFC are willing to take enquiries, but a central question remains – what happens to those colleges whose claim in no way reflects the real cost of the support they have delivered?

If there is a perception among sector colleges that the rules can be differently interpreted by different college managers, confidence in the funding methodology will be undermined.

What to include in the claim

The survey asked each college to indicate which functions were included in its calculation of additional support costs for basic skills and ESOL. Table 3 shows the activities included by 11 of the colleges. **Bold typeface** in the table indicates that the majority of colleges included that particular item. Participating colleges showed great variety in the number of items claimed for – the highest 'hit rate' was 13 items and the lowest was four.

Table 3 Activities included in claims by 11 colleges

Staff time, functions and resources	Number of colleges claiming
assessment	**11**
negotiation, preparation & review	**8**
teaching	**11**
teaching in smaller groups	**10**
supervised drop-in/open learning	**7**
developing/adapting diagnostic assessment materials	3
developing/adapting teaching materials	4
additional personal counselling	4
liaison with colleagues, outside agencies and specialists	5
administration	**10**
technical support	4
management	4
database maintenance	2
(specialist) accommodation	1
depreciation of equipment/ hardware	1

Colleges may find it useful to assess their own claims against this list. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the items listed above cannot automatically be applied to each support claim. FEFC expects colleges to justify how the claim was arrived at for each individual student.

Calculating claims

Participating colleges reported using two different ways of arriving at support claims:

- calculating a standard hourly cost
- costing the facilities and resources used by each individual student.

As Table 4 demonstrates, five out of the eight colleges which responded to this question primarily used the standard cost method while one college calculated most of its claim on an individual basis. Two made significant use of both methods.

Table 4 Claiming for basic skills and ESOL support

College number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Calculation on the basis of standard cost	100%	100%	100%	98%	→90%	60%	40%E	20%E
Calculation of individual use of additional support	0%	0%	0%	2%	←10%	40%	60%E	80%E

E = estimate

During discussions between the representatives of the participating colleges, it became clear that in many colleges there was also no ready information on the standard hourly costs used to calculate additional support. Several representatives did not know the method of calculation or costs for their own college. The reasons for this were threefold:

- colleges are still evolving processes for calculating costs
- there is little opportunity for non-finance staff to discuss funding issues
- competition makes staff reluctant to discuss confidential information outside 'home base'.

As part of the project postal survey each college was asked to identify the standard hourly cost of delivering basic skills and ESOL support. Figure 1 shows that in six of the nine colleges the rate was between £35 and £40. The lowest and highest standard costs differed significantly from the mean, with the lowest standard hourly cost at £17.50 and the highest at £51.75. Although different environments and learners may account partly for this variation, the deviation certainly seems to indicate that some colleges may be under-claiming for additional learning support.

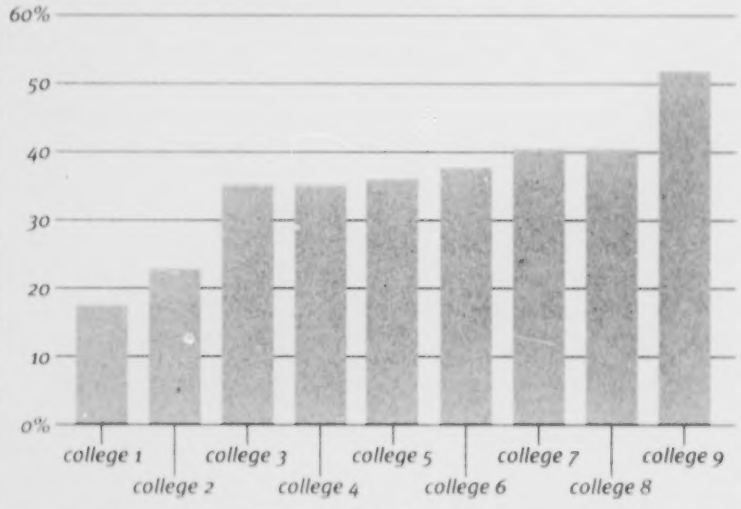
The effect of ALF convergence on learning support costs

All colleges claim units for additional support out of their total unit allocation. However, the actual amount of revenue a college can receive for its additional support, as well as for other elements of activity such as entry, on-programme and achievement, depends on the average level of funding (ALF) which the college receives per unit. In response to the wide variations in colleges' funding prior to incorporation, a process of convergence was introduced by the FEFC as part of the funding methodology.

The project colleges reported that ALF convergence had not directly affected the volume of learning support or the quality of delivery – five out of the 12 colleges were 'low ALF' colleges and had seen an overall improvement in funding. However, the 'low ALF' colleges complained their units were calculated at a lower rate than for 'high ALF' colleges.

One college commented: 'We are a low ALF college. It doesn't seem fair that the real costs are calculated into units, so that the actual money paid out is lower.'

Figure 1 **The standard hourly rate for delivering basic skills and ESOL support**



The following case study illustrates the impact of the average level of funding on a learning support claim:

> *Colleges A and B both have a standard hourly cost for additional support of £40 per hour. The minimum expenditure needed to trigger a Band 1 claim is £50,150. For this amount both colleges would be able to fund 12.5 hours of support to individual students (£50,150 ÷ £40 = 12.5). Suppose that College A has an ALF of £20 per unit while College B had an ALF of £10 per unit. For 42 units, College A would earn £840 per student and College B £420.*

The impact of convergence alters the balance between income and expenditure very significantly. Some colleges would prefer to see a standard national hourly rate.

The proportion of colleges' FEFC funding represented by additional support units

The survey included a question which asked participants to give information on their overall college budget. Table 5 shows:

- additional support as a percentage of overall FEFC funding
- other types of funding as a percentage of the total college budget.

The seven colleges which responded to this question are ranked in order of their additional support claims. The first column gives the total FEFC funding allocation, with the percentage of funding designated for basic skills or ESOL support identified in the last column.

The percentages for 'other' sources of funding turned out to be surprisingly large for most colleges. Further inquiries revealed that sources included LEA, FE franchising, work-based training and the income derived from a business school.

Although colleges are not required to submit details about the proportion of learning support units within their total unit claim, the financial forecasts and additional support forms enable FEFC to calculate that 2–3% of the total number of units in the system are claimed for additional support. This figure is reasonably similar to the average percentage of 3.3% for the colleges which provided information for our project.

However, the table also shows that additional support represented a very different proportion of the overall FEFC claim among the participating colleges, with 10% as the highest proportion and 0.15% as the lowest.

The profile of basic skills and ESOL additional support claims 1994-7

One survey question investigated the profile of additional support funding since its introduction in 1994. Many colleges had problems submitting precise figures, particularly for the first year. Only six were able to give figures for the year-on-year percentages of the student population covered by the support claim. Table 6 averages the responses for the 10 colleges which responded.

Table 5	Additional support, FEFC funding and the total college budget					
Total FEFC funding as % of colleges' overall budgets	ESF %	TEC %	Section 11 %	SRB %	Other funding %	Additional support for basic skills or ESOL as % of total FEFC funding
80	1	1	0	1	17	10
80	3	3	1	1	12	5.6
86	3	1	0	0	10	2.5
68	3	1	0	0	28	2
66	17	1	1	1.5	13.5	1.6
82	1.2	2.2	0	0	14.6	1.2
84	0.7	0.3	0.3	0	14.7	0.15

Table 6	Profile support funding since 1994		
	Student population claimed for	Total number of units claimed	As table 5 above
94/95	1.4%	752,307	–
95/96	3.1%	875,320	+14%
96/97	3.1%	888,664	+1.5%

The figures show that among the project colleges there has been an increase in learning support funding over the three years since its introduction. The number of colleges claiming support units has also increased: five colleges did not claim for units in 1994–5, whereas all planned to claim for the year 1996–7. The percentage of the student population covered by the claim had stayed the same or increased in all but one case.

Funding implications for delivery of basic skills and ESOL additional support

Four delivery issues were highlighted by project colleges:

- One-to-one support is seldom the best method of delivering basic skills or ESOL support, because it is neither cost-effective nor educationally appropriate. However, some finance directors encourage the provision of one-to-one support because it fits better with the requirements of the funding claim; practitioners are concerned that this approach may distort delivery.
- Teaching in smaller groups can benefit all students, some of whom may have similar support needs. Some colleges give support by dividing the class into smaller groups but load the claim for additional support funding on to specific students; there is confusion as to whether this is an acceptable practice.
- Among a group of 40 students, a college may claim additional units for six students who need literacy support, one student who needs numeracy support and four students who need ESOL support. Other students within the group may also take advantage of at least some parts of this support; the claim misrepresents the true support picture.
- Funding may be jeopardised if there is drop-out among students for whom the college is planning to make a funding claim. Learners with the most support needs are also the ones who are most likely to drop out. If students drop out, many colleges substitute alternative 'vehicles' for the funding claim; there is confusion as to whether this is acceptable.

Interpreting FEFC guidance on additional support

While some colleges were satisfied with the clarity of the FEFC's guidance on additional support, others reported concerns about certain aspects.

The interpretation of the terms 'basic skills' and 'ESOL', and the level at which they are taught, appears to have affected support provision and unit claims. According to a minority of college staff, basic skills could only be delivered at Entry level or at level 1. While the majority of staff did not share this opinion, FEFC might consider providing a clearer definition of basic skills/ESOL support.

FEFC defines additional support as '... direct support for learning to individual students, over and above that which is normally provided in a standard learning programme which leads to their primary learning goal'. There was uncertainty among colleges about which elements of support should be mainstream-funded and which can reasonably be defined as additional. There is evidence that the different interpretations of the guidance by colleges – and sections within colleges – have created a variety of models. FEDA will shortly be undertaking a research project on the nature and quality of additional support services in response to the findings of the Learning Difficulties and Disabilities Committee. The research will include a review of the types of support described as 'generic' and 'additional'.

Conclusion and recommendations

The research found that:

- Screening and diagnostic assessment are vital to success.
- Diagnostic materials for second language speakers need improvement.
- Part-time students are getting less access to additional support than full time students.
- Many students who are receiving additional support do not trigger the lowest band and therefore cannot be claimed for.
- Take-up of learning support and retention on support are problematic. We need to know why students are not taking up the opportunities offered.
- Subject teaching and learning support need to be integrated.
- Mainstream teachers need training to improve their ability to offer basic skills support.

- Colleges include different elements in their costing of additional support.
- College staff are sometimes unclear about how to interpret FEFC guidance on how to claim for additional support.
- Colleges calculate a very different hourly cost for delivering additional support.
- ALF convergence may carry difficult implications for additional support.
- Colleges which achieved effective support and claim submissions had effective tracking systems, good communication channels between management, finance and teaching staff and clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

The findings of this research are supported by a number of other reports including *Learning works*, the report of the Widening Participation Committee, and *Inclusive learning*, the report of the Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities Committee and *Staying the course* a Basic Skills Agency report on the relation between basic skills support, drop-out, retention and achievement.

Learning works emphasises the need for changes in the funding system alongside other strategies for widening participation. Recruitment of under-represented, disaffected and under-achieving groups of learners into FE needs to be underpinned by better assessment and more intensive support if these learners are to be successful. Such processes could involve increased costs to colleges. The report recommends that FEFC introduce a plain English guide to show how funding arrangements can support widening participation. Particular emphasis is placed on the need for clear guidance for claiming additional support. Statistical studies undertaken for the committee showed better completion and achievement rates for students who were receiving additional support compared with others in similar situations. The report also recommends increased funding for additional support and guidance and, in the longer term, that the funding system be simplified.

Inclusive learning reports that 'some colleges were uncertain about what they were expected to provide for students before the bottom of the threshold is reached. Smaller colleges expressed particular concern about their ability to deliver support for large numbers of students with small support needs'. The report also notes, as we have done, that 'some colleges were uncertain about how to claim and use funds for additional support, especially how to calculate costs and account for expenditure'. The report recommends a number of changes to the arrangements for claiming additional support, including the suggestion that colleges receive guidance on what should be provided before the threshold to the bottom band. The funding issues arising from this research are being addressed as part of the current in-depth review of FEFC funding methodology. FEFC circular 97/31 reports on stage one of this Fundamental Review and includes recommendations that the methodology:

- should be simplified wherever possible
- needs to be tested against the main issues facing the sector over the next five years.

The circular identifies issues for consideration during stage two of the Fundamental Review including the need to evaluate:

- the additional support mechanism
- the overall impact of the funding methodology on the curriculum.

The Basic Skills Agency publication, *Staying the course* (BSA, 1997), reports on research carried out with 18 colleges in 1995–6. It finds that one in three students had poor basic skills and that basic skills support significantly increased retention and completion.

Both the FEDA and BSA research reports underline the benefits of initial assessment for **all** students and identify the need for further research in this important area of college activity.

Retention of students across different programmes

Chapter 2

Adjei Barwuah and Felicity Munday

Introduction

The aims of this project were to:

- assess the varying degrees of student retention by programme area and course
- identify reasons for variations in retention
- recommend strategies for addressing student drop-out.

The 10 project colleges were asked to investigate a sample of courses from Foundation to Advanced level, and both academic and vocational programmes. Each college was responsible for administering a student questionnaire which asked about their destinations, reasons for withdrawal and views of different aspects of the college. Current students were asked to complete the questionnaire at college while students who had withdrawn from their course were contacted by telephone or completed postal questionnaires. The survey findings are based on the 835 students in eight colleges who responded to the questionnaire. Colleges were particularly interested in the performance of A-level students so the sample of leavers does not reflect the balance of courses in colleges. Student focus groups were organised to explore further factors and interviews were held with

staff responsible for each of the courses within the project sample. College managers were interviewed to gather contextual information on each of the colleges.

Students surveyed

Colleges provided initial data on drop-out rates across different courses and programmes so that an appropriate sample could be selected. The sample of courses included academic and vocational programmes, courses ranging from Foundation to Advanced level, and courses aimed at different age groups. It was restricted to full-time programmes with over 450 hours of study and to the first year of two-year programmes.

The sample included:

- GCE A-level
- Access to HE
- GNVQ Business at Advanced, Intermediate and Foundation levels and their equivalent (for example BTEC programmes)
- GNVQ Leisure and Tourism at Advanced, Intermediate and Foundation levels and their equivalent
- GNVQ Engineering at Advanced, Intermediate and Foundation levels and their equivalent
- GNVQ Construction and the Built Environment at Advanced, Intermediate and Foundation levels and their equivalent.

Of the total number of students responding to the questionnaire:

- 36% were taking GCE A-level courses
- 23% were following GNVQ Intermediate courses, or equivalent
- 20% were on GNVQ Advanced courses, or equivalent
- 15% were on Access to HE programmes
- only 8% were following GNVQ Foundation programmes.

While current students were fairly evenly distributed across GCE A-level, GNVQ Advanced and GNVQ Intermediate programmes or their equivalents, most of the withdrawn students at advanced level had been taking A-level programmes. For this reason it is difficult to match overall conclusions about student drop-out to specific courses and programmes.

The majority of the student sample were attending college (87% – about the national average) with only 13% of responses coming from students who had dropped out. Just over half were female. The largest proportion of students (71%) were aged 16–18, 17% were aged 19–24, 8% aged 25–34, 4% aged 35–55 and less than 1% over 55. Students classifying themselves as white represented 26% of the sample; there was a fairly even spread across other ethnic groups. This clearly reflects the urban college setting.

The project colleges

The project colleges included eight general FE colleges and two sixth-form colleges. Of the eight general FE colleges only two had continuation rates that exceeded the median for the sector (86%) and the lowest was 77%. However, the mean of 84% was the same as the sector mean for general FE colleges. Of the two sixth-form colleges, one equalled and the other was 6% below the sector median*. For reasons which have been discussed elsewhere**, FEFC data under-reports student drop-out.

Results of the student survey

The findings of the student survey are set out in the following sections. While the overall comparisons between withdrawn and current students are the most important, differences between gender, ethnic groups and age groups based on the total sample have been included where the findings are significant.

* FEFC (September 1997) **Performance Indicators 1995–6.** FEFC

** Martinez, P (1997) **Improving student retention: a guide to successful strategies.** p.43

Students who classified themselves as white were more likely to withdraw than students from other ethnic groups. Language difficulties did not appear to be a major factor as 48% of current students compared with 33% of students who had withdrawn said that English was their second language. FEFC additional support units were claimed for 20% of all students included in the survey, only 2% had dropped out. The age, gender and ethnicity profiles of withdrawn students are shown in Appendix E.

Destinations of withdrawn students

Most of these early leavers were switching to other courses or evening jobs:

- the most common destination was a course somewhere else else (50% went on to a full-time and 31% to a part-time course at another institution)
- 42% went into employment (27% into full-time and 15% into part-time).

The figures suggest that many are combining part-time work and part-time study.

Table 1 **Destinations of withdrawn students by course type (%)**

	GCE A-level	GNVQ Advanced or equivalent	GNVQ Intermediate or equivalent	GNVQ Foundation
Full-time course	25	30	13	31
Part-time job	30	30	13	8
Full-time job	13	–	19	15
Part-time course	14	10	31	–
Not employed	5	20	6	15
Other	23	30	25	46

The number of withdrawn students is small, but Table 1 shows that:

- a large proportion of A-level, GNVQ Advanced and GNVQ Foundation-level students enrolled on a different full-time course elsewhere
- among GNVQ Intermediate students, a significant proportion (31%) went to part-time courses
- 13% of A-level students, 19% of GNVQ Intermediate and 15% of GNVQ Foundation-level students left for full-time employment
- students on GNVQ Advanced and Foundation programmes were far less likely to find full-time paid employment.

Rates for male and female students entering full-time jobs were similar. Significantly more females than males left college for part-time jobs, while more males than females left for full-time courses elsewhere. There are no significant patterns in relation to ethnicity.

Younger students were more likely to transfer to full-time courses elsewhere than older students: 47% of 16–18 year olds compared with 29% of 19–24 year olds, and 21% of those aged 25 and over.

Enrolling at college

From the number of responses received it was not possible to draw any firm conclusions about whether students with fewer GCSE A–C grades were more likely to drop out. However, more current than withdrawn students had previous vocational qualifications: 8% of current and 2% of withdrawn students had GNVQ Intermediate-level qualifications or their equivalent.

Figure 1 on the next page shows that reasons for enrolling on a course differed significantly between current and withdrawn students. The main motive for current students was to gain a place at university: 71% compared with only 55% of withdrawn students. While both groups wanted to get qualified and improve their knowledge, more withdrawn students enrolled because of the course content: 78% compared with only 58% of current students. The fact that more withdrawn students wanted to get a

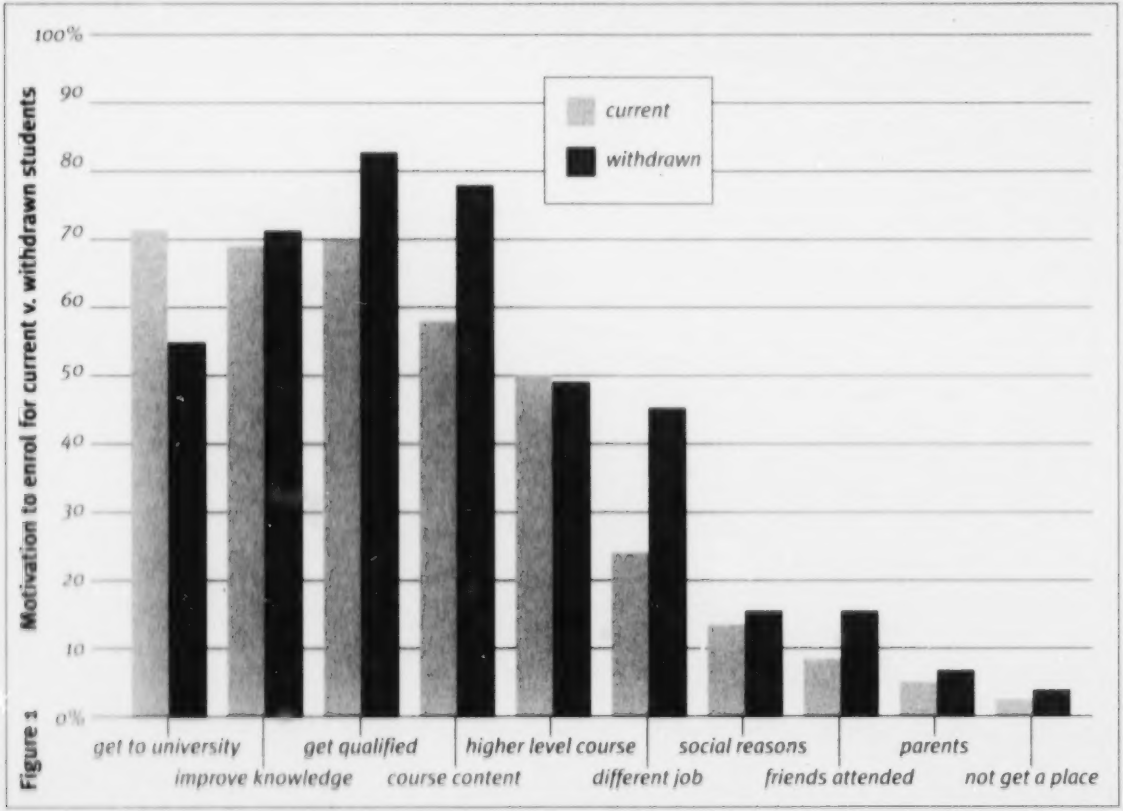


Figure 1

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different job – 45% compared with 24% of current students – may reflect the older age profile of withdrawn students. Slightly more withdrawn students enrolled for social reasons, because their friends attended, as a result of parental pressure or because they could not get a place elsewhere.

Four-fifths of older (19–34) students were interested in gaining a place at university compared with two thirds of 16- to 18-year-olds. More 16 to 18-year-olds applied to college because their friends attended or because they were persuaded by their parents.

As Table 2 below illustrates, students on different courses showed no significant difference in their reasons for enrolling with the exception of GNVQ Foundation students who appeared more influenced by the fact that their friends attended college.

Table 2 Motivation to enrol by course type (%)

	A-level	GNVQ Adv. or equiv.	GNVQ Inter. or equiv.	GNVQ Found.	Access to HE
Improved knowledge	70	65	75	68	70
Get qualified	71	73	75	75	63
Different job	30	21	28	33	28
Higher level course	50	47	53	55	51
To get to university	66	75	71	70	61
Social reasons	14	15	15	12	9
Friends attended	10	10	10	20	9
Parents	7	5	5	7	5
To get a place	3	3	2	5	2
Course content	66	56	64	65	50

The timing of applications made by current and withdrawn students was broadly similar, but withdrawn students were more likely to apply nearer the start of the course with some 47% enrolling two months or less before the start, compared with 30% of current students.

More females than males – 32% compared with 22% – enrolled over six months before the start of the course, and more males – 9% compared with 2% – enrolled after the start.

Both current and withdrawn students had a high opinion of the college before starting their course. Interestingly, neither group's view had changed significantly for the better or worse since starting college, although current students were marginally more positive and withdrawn students slightly more negative. Analysis by age, ethnicity and gender showed no significant differences.

Both current and withdrawn students were pleased with the help they received in choosing their course. However, while both groups of students commented favourably on the information they received about their course and the support they were given in settling in, current students were significantly more positive about these aspects.

Students over 25 were more positive about the about help they received both in choosing and settling into their course than those in the 16–18 age group. Analysis by ethnicity and gender showed no significant differences.

Experience of studying at college

All students were asked their opinion of various aspects of the course, in terms of help received and the quality of college provision and facilities.

While both groups gave favourable opinions overall on all aspects of their course, current students were generally more positive in their responses. Aspects with which students who had withdrawn were considerably less satisfied included:

- the quality of teaching and tutorial support
- help and advice on coursework
- feedback on assignments

- help with maths and computer skills
- help in getting into university
- support with personal problems
- support with financial problems.

Students were also asked to comment on the type and degree of difficulties they had encountered on their course. They identified as particular problems:

- the timing of the course
- the appropriateness of their course (had they made the right choice?)
- the help they got from teachers
- enjoyment of college
- relationships with other students.

Female students rated all aspects more favourably than male students. Areas where female students were significantly more positive included:

- feedback on assignments
- help with English and computer skills
- help in developing job-related skills and in getting into employment.

Male students experienced more difficulties with their course than female students, particularly in relation to:

- the appropriateness of their course
- their enjoyment of college
- their relationships with other students.

Analysis by course type and ethnicity showed no significant differences in rating courses and college life.

Students in the 16–18 age group, and to a lesser extent the 19–24 age group, were generally less positive about their experience of college than those aged 25 and over. Students' views on certain aspects of their course differed widely depending on their age. The greatest areas of difference were:

- whether the number of courses was adequate
- the quality of teaching and tutorials
- help and advice with coursework
- help with English and communications
- help in getting into employment and to university
- safety and security at college.

There was no significant difference in students' views according to type of course.

There was some evidence to suggest that some A-level students were dropping subjects rather than dropping out. At the beginning of their course 9% of current A-level students were taking one A-level subject, 10% were taking two and 78% were taking three subjects. At the time of the survey the proportions had changed to 14% taking one subject, 14% taking two subjects and 63% taking three subjects. Students on all types of course felt they had little time to study and too great a workload.

The questionnaire included the opportunity for all students to comment on what they liked most and least about their college. Students' responses to this question are set out in Table 3. (No distinction is shown between current and withdrawn students). Students were most satisfied with social aspects of college, relationships with teachers and their course itself, and most critical of college facilities and timetabling.

Personal difficulties

Table 4 contains a comparison of the difficulties face by current and withdrawn students. In all aspects covered by the survey, with the exception of discrimination, withdrawn students reported greater levels of hardship. The proportion of both current and withdrawn students who reported financial, travel and other personal problems was relatively high. The most significant difference between the two groups occurred in relation to family problems.

Table 3 What students liked most and least about the college			
Liked most about college	**No. of respts.**	**Liked least about college**	**No. of respts.**
Social aspect	189	Lack of or poor facilities	125
Helpful teachers	156	Timetabling	62
Good/interesting course	134	Lack of common room/smoking area	42
Atmosphere	121	Course too demanding	41
Friendly teachers	113	Attitude of other students	35
General facilities	87	Lack of social life	28
Quality of teaching	78	Unhelpful teachers	23
IT equipment	49	Unfriendly teachers	19
Library	46	Adult treatment	21
Sports facilities	38	Library	46
Canteen	26	Poor quality teaching	19
Timetable	20	Security	19
Safety & security	19	Library	18
		Building structure	17
		IT equipment	13
		The course	11

Table 4 Comparison of difficulties faced by current and withdrawn students		
	Current	**Withdrawn**
Financial hardship	36%	42%
Travel problems	28%	34%
Accommodation problems	6%	11%
Health problems	12%	16%
Family problems	20%	36%
Other personal problems	29%	40%
Discrimination	8%	8%

Analyses by gender and ethnicity among all respondents showed that:

- more female than male students experienced family and other personal problems
- 42% of students were identified in the 'Other Black' category and 38% of students in the 'Not Known' category reported family problems, compared with 29% of white, 17% of Pakistani, 14% of Indian and 8% of Chinese students
- 50% of 'Not Known', 44% of 'Other Black' and 43% of 'Other Asian' students reported other personal problems, compared with 36% of Chinese students, 30% of white students, 25% of Pakistani and 21% of Indian students.

Figure 2 on the next page shows the difficulties faced by students at college according to age. Broadly, it shows that:

- 16- to 18-year-olds reported less financial hardship than older students
- students aged between 19 and 35 were more likely to report family and other personal problems
- students in the 19–25 age group were more likely to experience problems with travel, accommodation, health and discrimination.

A substantial minority of both current and withdrawn students found it difficult to afford items such as books, equipment and examination fees. Travel costs were seen as a major burden.

Work and benefits

Figure 3 shows that although the majority of students, both current and withdrawn, did not undertake any paid employment during term time, the overall number of hours withdrawn students spent working was significantly higher. Students who withdrew were also more likely to be spending particularly long hours (over 21 hours per week) in paid work.

The project findings did not distinguish by age between current and withdrawn students in paid employment. However, as Figure 4 indicates, of the combined groups of students, 16-18 year olds were less likely to be in paid employment than 19-24 year olds, but where they were employed they tended to work longer hours.

Figure 2 **Difficulties faced at college by age**

Figure 3 **Current v. withdrawn student hours in paid term-time employment**

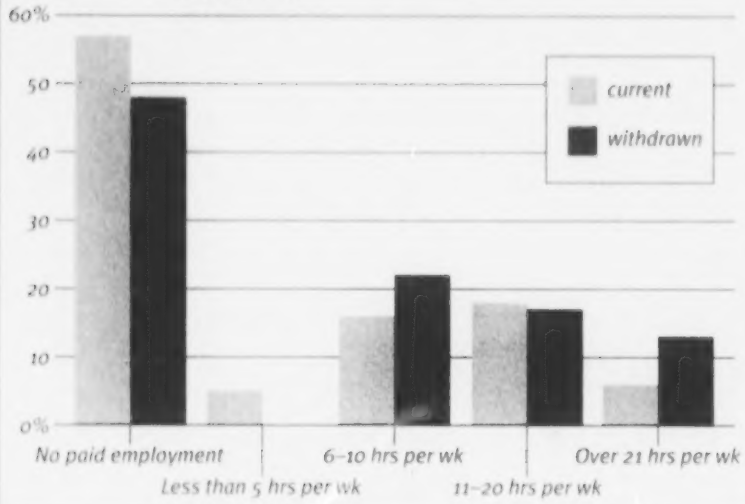


Figure 4 **Hours in paid term-time employment by age**

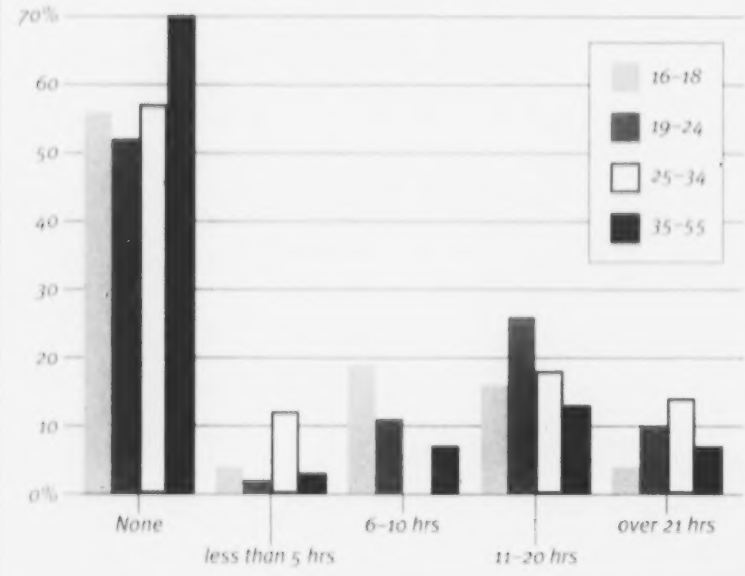


Table 5 shows that while in most respects there was little difference between the two groups of students, withdrawn students were:

- less likely to have a student grant (discretionary grant policies varied widely between LEAs)
- more likely to receive income support and housing benefit.

Table 5 Comparison of benefits received by current and withdrawn students

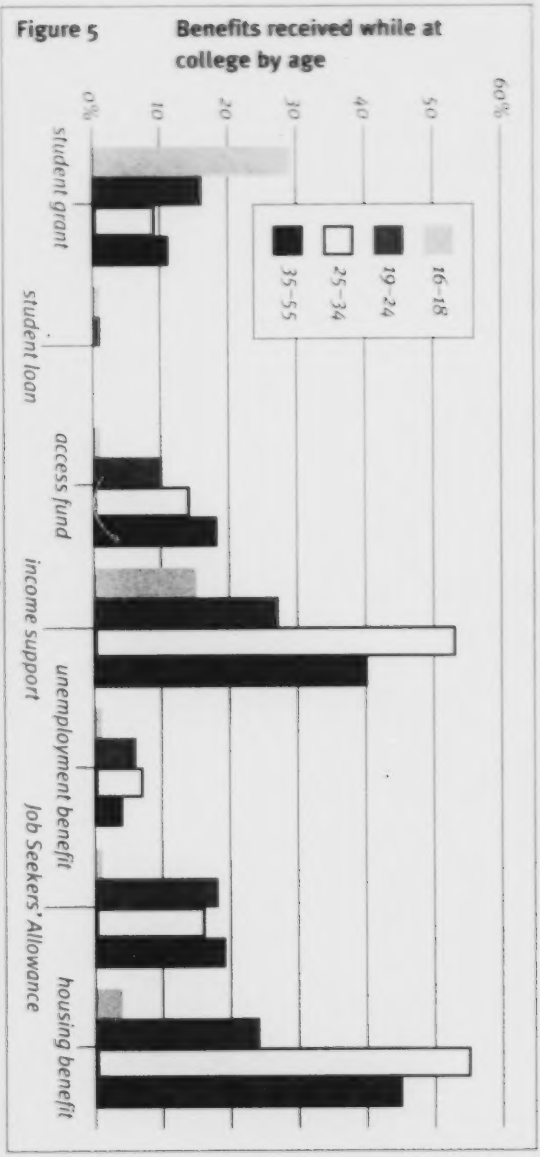
	Current	Withdrawn
Student grant	25%	14%
Student loan	1%	1%
Access fund	4%	7%
*Income support	21%	29%
Unemployment benefit	3%	3%
Job Seekers' Allowance	6%	7%
Housing benefit	13%	21%

Of the combined student groups marginally more male students received student grants and unemployment benefit, and slightly more female students received income support and housing benefit.

Figure 5 shows benefits received by age. Broadly, it indicates that:

- significantly more 16–18 age students received grants
- older students in all groups were more likely to receive income support and housing benefit
- an average of 18% of students over 18 were receiving the Job Seekers' Allowance
- overall, a high proportion of older students were in receipt of benefits.

Figure 5 **Benefits received while at college by age**



Staff perceptions

Staff interviewed for the project regarded student motivation and commitment as possibly the most important factors affecting student completion. For younger students in particular this often differentiated those who left from those who stayed in the hope of getting a job or going to university as a result of gaining a qualification.

In staff's view, the main issues were:

- poor school attendance records
- behavioural problems
- the fact that the course was not the student's first choice
- doubts about the market value of a degree
- fear of the financial implications of progressing to HE.

Low levels of motivation on Foundation- and Intermediate-level courses were common. These students had often underachieved at school, had poor school attendance records; they tended to drift away and eventually drop out once they realised the workload expected of them.

Some students enrolled at college believing it to be different from school and were reluctant to accept college discipline. Colleges varied in their willingness to recruit students with poor attendance records and behavioural difficulties. A few colleges reported a high proportion of students with behavioural difficulties at Foundation level, with a number of Foundation- and Intermediate-level students being required to leave for disciplinary reasons. In one college, however, only students with good school reports were recruited at Foundation level.

For many students at Foundation level the course had not been their first choice; some were reluctant to accept what they saw as a loss in status. Other Foundation- and Intermediate-level students enrolled on college courses because they were unable to find a job on leaving school and left the course for employment at the earliest opportunity.

Retention on A-level, Access and GNVQ Advanced-level courses was generally higher than at Foundation and Intermediate level. Students on Advanced-level courses tended to be more highly motivated and committed,

with a high proportion planning to progress to HE. Asian students, in particular, were likely to have HE as their primary progression goal. In the case of one Advanced GNVQ Engineering course all the Asian students planned to progress to HE whereas for other students employment was their primary goal.

Concern about the financial implications of studying for a degree, and scepticism about its eventual market value prompted a number of Access students to drop out. According to one college, the Access students most likely to leave were those who had not fully thought through their decision to return to study. A college with a wide range of Access provision reported that more vocationally focused courses such as Access to Computing and Access to Nursing had higher retention rates than courses such as Access to Humanities; such courses also had a higher take-up by black students.

Some A-level students, too, particularly in areas of high unemployment, questioned the value of progressing to HE if it was unlikely to lead to employment. One college reported that female A-level students were more reluctant than male students to face the prospect of future poverty and student loans, and were more likely to leave for employment. However, in general both A-level tutors and tutors of GNVQ Advanced-level courses reported that motivation to progress to HE encouraged students to continue. Although there was some drop-out between the first and the second year of a two-year course, relatively few students left in their second year.

Strategies to improve retention recommended by staff included:

- designing a broadly-based, cross-curricular Foundation course for students lacking a clearly focused vocational commitment
- introducing college certificates for merit and attendance
- staff development on ways of getting co-operation in the classroom
- introducing a bursary scheme, with employers helping to select students
- ensuring strong links with HE, including Access modules delivered on HE premises and on college premises by HE staff.

Content and expectations

Inappropriate course choice and unfulfilled expectations were seen by staff as significant factors in drop-out. The issues highlighted by staff included:

- parental pressure
- course status
- course too academic
- lack of confidence
- absence of role models
- match with career aspirations.

While students were more likely to continue where they enjoyed positive support from parents, parental pressure to stay on in education could also have the opposite effect. Staff highlighted the unrealistic expectations of some Asian parents as a particular issue. One college reported a high drop-out from Law which it attributed to pressure from Asian parents on their sons to become barristers and solicitors. Another reported a high drop-out of Asian males from science subjects.

For GCE A-level tutors, the fact that students and parents often perceived A-level to have higher status than vocational programmes was a potential problem. Some students who found difficulty coping with A-level were reluctant to transfer to vocational courses.

In some cases, higher drop-out rates were reported for subjects such as Science and Maths which were seen as more difficult, and the didactic teaching approaches of some A-level teachers were not always popular with students.

Unrealistic expectations of returning to study and an absence of role models who had succeeded in higher education were thought to have a significant influence on some students' decision to drop out from Access courses. Access students frequently experienced crises of confidence, and those with low self-esteem or confidence in their ability were more likely to leave. According to one college, Access students often left at the time when UCAS applications were being completed.

Younger students were more likely to leave than older students if their course or college did not meet their expectations. Among this younger age

group students' choices were often based on hazy ideas about future jobs and careers, rather than a realistic understanding of what the course involved.

Business Studies was a popular choice with the Asian community and was seen by many students as a route to making money, a career in the City or setting up their own business. Staff quoted examples of students who anticipated progressing to careers in Finance but who dropped out on finding GNVQ Finance units too difficult. Students with an interest in sport and unrealistic expectations of employment as sports coaches were sometimes inappropriately recruited to Leisure and Tourism courses.

In Engineering and Construction, staff considered that students had unrealistically low expectations of their career prospects. White students saw Engineering as offering poor employment prospects and low status and it was sometimes their second or third choice of career. This affected recruitment to these courses rather than retention. The status Black Africans accorded Engineering and Construction was, however, much higher, and Electronics recruited well from the Asian community. Courses at Foundation level in Construction and the Built Environment attracted students wanting a more practical course, Intermediate-level courses failed to recruit and the students most likely to complete Advanced-level courses successfully were those with a family background in the construction industry. Students recruited to Foundation- and Intermediate-level courses in Engineering, Construction and the Built Environment, and Leisure and Tourism often found them too academic and wanted something more practical and vocationally focused. Where these courses included practical projects and additional industry-focused qualifications this improved retention.

Where Foundation-level courses were perceived as having low status retention was poorer. In colleges where Foundation students were taught alongside Intermediate-level student retention rates were generally better.

Recommended strategies

Strategies recommended by colleges to improve retention included:

- closer relationships with parents including the introduction of parents evenings, home visits and termly reports on progress and attendance
- clearer handbooks and induction procedures to tackle unrealistic expectations
- the introduction of a generic induction unit which is accredited
- the development of A-level subject tasters
- staff development on teaching and learning styles including less didactic approaches to A-level teaching
- the introduction of a Pre-Access course and one-month taster courses
- the introduction of black mentoring arrangements and the use of black teachers as role models
- increased opportunities for practical work including major projects, for example building a hovercraft, and a programme of transnational exchanges
- the introduction, alongside GNVQs, of additional industry-focused qualifications such as NVQs and NVQ units
- integrated provision at Foundation and Intermediate levels.

Ability, language and key skills

Staff felt that low ability, language difficulties or lack of key skills made students more likely to have difficulty coping with the demands of their course. Having fallen behind and failed to catch up, they were more likely to withdraw from the course. The issues raised by staff included:

- recruitment of less able students
- poor entry qualifications
- quality and status of language and learning support
- development of learning and study skills.

Staff frequently claimed that urban colleges recruited lower ability students to courses as a result of competition from other providers, notably sixth-

form colleges and local schools. This was felt to be particularly true in the case of Business Studies and, to a lesser extent, Leisure and Tourism. In London there was considerable competition between FE colleges and a number had reputations for accepting students who had difficulty gaining a place elsewhere.

GCE A-level tutors, in particular, emphasised the link between low ability and drop-out. The sixth-form colleges in the sample recruited from a predominantly Asian population across the ability range. Their A-level retention rates were much higher than those of a college which recruited primarily white A-level resit students from local schools, many of whom were living independently.

Colleges varied in their entry requirements for different courses. Some colleges, for example, had an open access policy for Foundation and Intermediate-level courses. A significant number of staff reported that students with lower levels of qualifications on entry were more likely to drop out. Staff considered that students on vocational courses with lower qualifications at entry were more likely to leave for employment. Some had difficulty with external tests and students on courses in Engineering and Construction whose Maths ability was poor often felt they were failing and were more likely to leave.

In the case of A-level students, those with lower GCSE grades were more likely to withdraw or drop subjects and those who dropped subjects were in turn more likely to leave. Some students started as full-time students, became part-time students and then left. A number of colleges reported that the jump from GCSE to A-level caused difficulties for the less able.

One college noted that students on Access courses receiving credits for their work at level 2 could become despondent and were more likely to leave. Students progressing from GNVQ Foundation to Intermediate and then from Intermediate- to Advanced-level courses struggled to cope, but generally tended to complete the course. There is no evidence, therefore, that students progressing from Foundation courses are more likely to drop out.

Some colleges recruited a relatively high proportion of students in need of language support. Overall, staff thought that poor basic skills and lan-

guage difficulties had a greater effect on achievement than retention. Student attitudes to learning support varied between colleges and courses. Where there had been delays in identifying additional support needs and making appropriate provision, or where students felt stigmatised by being identified as needing learning support, this had affected retention. However, where language and learning support were integral to the course staff felt this had a beneficial effect on retention. Older students with language difficulties were reported as less likely to leave than younger students. Younger students, however, commonly resented having to attend learning workshops. GCE A-level students in one college were very positive in their attitude to learning support workshops yet in another they failed to attend.

Lack of effective study skills was highlighted as a significant factor at all levels. Study skills were not adequately built into A-level courses and some students on lower-level vocational courses were unable to cope effectively with work outside the classroom.

Recommended strategies

The strategies which staff reported to be successful included:

At entry:

- the development of a sixth-form centre with a strong social identity and effective pastoral care systems
- more rigorous entry requirements, for example the introduction of a points score for A-level entry requiring a GCSE Grade B rather than a Grade C profile; a GCSE Grade D profile for entry to Intermediate level courses
- the use of psychometric tests to test aptitude, for example in Engineering
- streaming GNVQ Advanced provision with one stream including an A-level and the other having less additionality
- systematic initial diagnostic assessment for all students.

On programme:

- clearly stated criteria for progression to the second year of a two-year course
- the development of study skills within A-level courses
- greater emphasis within tutorial programmes on developing study skills, including a modular tutorial programme with OCN accreditation
- more integrated approaches to the delivery of key skills
- the piloting of the key skill Improving Own Learning and Performance
- more on course learning support and the integration of language development within mainstream provision.

Workload and part-time employment

Staff considered that students' inability to manage their workload contributed significantly to drop-out.

Particular issues identified were:

- reductions in course hours
- course organisation and assessment arrangements
- course timetables
- part-time employment.

Reductions in course hours meant that students had less individual contact with teachers. Students who found it difficult to work independently and needed more support were therefore more likely to drop out. Large gaps in timetables also encouraged students to leave the premises rather than studying independently (although for some students this provided an opportunity to take on part-time employment.)

The burden of coursework assessment on GNVQ courses often caused students to fall behind. Some colleges were attempting to reduce the number of assignments required of students. Unexpected changes to timetables presented problems for students who were in part-time employment or had childcare arrangements, and could force them to drop out.

A high proportion of full-time students were thought to have part-time jobs and to be working more than 10 hours a week, with a significant proportion working in the black economy. For many older students, part-time jobs could be almost full-time. Less able students in particular found the pressure of part-time employment difficult to bear, and students working long and often unsocial hours were more likely to fall behind and to leave for part-time, temporary or casual work.

Recommended strategies

Successful strategies and action included:

- a clear statement of workload as a part of pre-entry interviews
- a well structured tutorial programme, including time management
- reduction in course content and number of assignments to reduce the workload
- distributing coursework and assignments more evenly over the year
- effective tracking of student attendance
- flexible workshop arrangements to enable students who fall behind to catch up.

Social relationships

Students often remained on courses for social reasons and late arrivals were therefore less likely to feel part of a group and more likely to drop out. A number of colleges reported that some students continued to come to college, even when they had stopped attending lessons. This was particularly an issue with young Asian students who found social relationships with the opposite sex easier on college premises. However, Asian girls coming to college from single-sex schools sometimes found the experience overwhelming and Asian parents occasionally withdrew their daughters if they were uneasy about the level of supervision.

While a number of the project colleges attracted students from a range of ethnic backgrounds, some had a reputation for attracting students from a

particular ethnic group. There were examples of white and Asian students leaving where they were outnumbered by other ethnic groups and, in one case, an incident of racial intimidation prompted the majority of Asian students to withdraw from a course. Colleges which succeeded in recruiting girls to courses in non-traditional areas often did not retain them.

Recommended strategies

Successful strategies recommended by staff included:

- induction which includes a structured team building programme
- the employment of Youth Workers on each college site
- close liaison and careful negotiation to reassure parents.

Personal difficulties

Staff agreed that financial hardship was one of the major personal issues underlying student drop-out. Other significant issues faced by students included:

- travel difficulties
- childcare arrangements
- emotional and family problems
- homelessness
- pregnancy
- problems of immigration and asylum seekers
- domestic responsibilities
- arranged marriages
- Job Seekers' Allowance.

Older students were more likely to leave college because of financial and personal difficulties. Young adults often faced considerable financial difficulties and those living independently from their parents were more likely to drop out.

The demands placed on students by travel and childcare arrangements contributed significantly to student drop-out. Some students attending London colleges travelled considerable distances and it was not

uncommon for younger students to enrol at a college away from their former school friends and their own culture as a way of making a fresh start.

A number of colleges admitted they had limited childcare facilities and that the burden of childcare costs could be considerable. Some Access courses recruited a high proportion of single parents who often had to pay childminders and who received limited support from college Access funds. One college reported that although single parents and those with childcare responsibilities were at high risk, men were more likely to give up. Where young men left manual jobs for an Access course they often found the financial pressures too great.

Some students faced serious emotional and family problems. A London college recruiting young adults with a background of addiction and homelessness described several of its Access students as being in crisis and needing two years to complete the course. Emotional problems included bereavement, domestic violence, divorce and breakdown of personal relationships. Some students were in custody, a number of young women left because of pregnancy, and pressure from husbands prompted some women to withdraw from Access courses. A number of colleges highlighted the problems faced by immigrants and asylum seekers. Colleges with a high proportion of Asian students reported that a significant number of Asian girls carried a high level of domestic responsibility, some left for arranged marriages and some failed to return after visits to the sub-continent. The prospect of an arranged marriage as an alternative to attending college nevertheless encouraged other students to stay.

The Job Seekers' Allowance was undoubtedly a factor in prompting some students to leave but there were mixed views on the extent of its impact. One college, for example, reported cases of second-year A-level students leaving home and going on to benefits, with JSA subsequently disrupting their studies and forcing them into employment. Another attributed higher drop-out rates from black students to the fact that they were more likely to be harassed by Employment Services. A third, however, observed that those in receipt of JSA had generally managed to remain on their course. Many students were not receiving JSA and worked instead in part-time jobs with long and often unsocial hours.

Recommended strategies

Among the strategies developed by colleges were:

- time spent keeping in touch with students who left early to encourage them to return at a later stage
- flexible and modular delivery, the use of unit certification and credit accumulation arrangements to enable studies to be spread over a longer period of time.

Progression to employment

Younger students were less likely to leave for full-time jobs in areas of high unemployment. However, students whose first choice was employment tended to leave at the earliest opportunity. Poorly motivated students failing to cope with the demands of the course might leave for casual or temporary employment. The stigma of having dropped out made many feel they could not return later. Some Asian students left to work in family businesses, others left for unskilled work, for example as taxi drivers or waiters, and many worked in supermarkets and fast food chains. It was not uncommon for students with part-time jobs to leave if offered the opportunity of a full-time post. A few second-year students left Advanced-level vocational courses early because the opportunity of employment arose, but the numbers were small and most preferred to complete the course and obtain a qualification.

Financial pressure to leave college for a job fell particularly heavily on young adults living independently and older students. Many went into the service sector where job opportunities were plentiful. A college running a vocationally focused Access course which recruited students wanting to progress from low-level hotel and catering jobs to management, found that 90% of those who left the course did so for financial reasons. Often these students had worked part-time, their paid employment had increased over the Christmas period, the burden of studying then became too great, and they dropped out of college to resume full-time work.

Successful strategies for reducing drop-out included:

- supported self-study arrangements for those who leave early for employment
- arranging course finish dates to accommodate seasonal employment.

Cross-college strategies

A few colleges had identified improved retention as a strategic objective. Although some had set targets for improvement at college level they did not always have a clearly identified strategy for achieving them.

- One college invited departments to bid for funding to support the development of new strategies for improving retention.
- Another was planning a staff development event on setting retention targets and action planning at programme level.

  College information systems varied significantly. Some colleges operated paper-based register systems while others collected data electronically and had introduced integrated systems. In the most effective practice tutors and course co-ordinators received regular and accurate reports on attendance which highlighted attendance patterns and enabled students at risk to be identified early.

- In one college, departmental heads received monthly MIS reports which provided demographic details of withdrawals. It had also completed an analysis of drop-out across courses by postcode and was planning to introduced exit questionnaires and guidance interviews.

  Most colleges had well-developed arrangements for obtaining student feedback via student questionnaires as part of their course review and evaluation procedures. Many courses included student representatives on course committees. Few had effective student councils or drew on information from student complaints. There was a need to develop more coherent overall systems for obtaining student views, and to ensure that colleges responded to feedback.

- As part of its strategy to improve retention one college introduced a college-wide student council, significantly improved the quality of its buildings and environment, and supported an extensive sports and arts programme.

Many colleges underlined the importance of strong tutoring and effective student tracking. However, despite efforts to improve tutorial support, approaches to tutoring and attendance monitoring were often inconsistent.

- The introduction of individual action planning had been particularly useful in encouraging tutors to spend time reviewing student progress and setting targets.
- A number of colleges had invested heavily in staff development for tutoring, developed comprehensive tutor handbooks and were defining college standards for induction, learning and tutorial support.

Some saw absenteeism as a greater problem than retention but agreed that clear policies and procedures on attendance monitoring, and prompt follow up of student absence were a part of preventing drop-out.

Most colleges had well-developed Student Services, but some identified a need to improve tutor referral and feedback to tutors. Staff development programmes for tutors included the development of counselling skills, and briefings on, for example, grants, benefits and immigration problems.

There was heavy demand for financial advice and personal counselling services and a number of colleges ran advice sessions and job search workshops to enable students to fulfil JSA requirements. In one case, as an alternative to JSA, a college 'Work Link' team helped students find part-time employment and apply for housing benefit.

Conclusions

The survey sample was weighted in favour of A-level students, and those aged 16-18, with a relatively low number of responses from withdrawn students. Although generalisations should be treated as indicative rather than definitive, there are a number of interesting findings.

Variations in retention rates for different courses and programmes across the sample of colleges as well as variations in systems and strategies for dealing with student drop-out, suggest a complex picture. Although all the project colleges serve urban populations, the student profile both of the

colleges and the courses varies, at least to some extent, in relation to ethnicity and age. Different cultural attitudes to education and training appear to exert a significant influence on retention. The urban setting could account for the large proportion of withdrawn students switching college and for students leaving to take up jobs.

There was a significant match between the student survey findings and staff views in a number of areas. Both sets of findings show that:

- withdrawn students are generally less satisfied with college provision than current students
- student motivation and commitment are key factors for younger students
- self-esteem and confidence are crucial to student success, particularly for younger students
- personal and financial difficulties have a significant effect on retention
- students in the 19-24 age group tend both to be less committed and to experience financial and personal difficulties; they are therefore particularly at risk
- language and learning support needs, although not the most important factor affecting retention, can affect achievement.

The following actions may help to address these issues:

- collaboration with schools to help young people develop more positive attitudes
- the development of role models and mentoring schemes
- more flexible forms of provision and accreditation to support 'stop-start' patterns of study, particularly among younger students
- improvements to pre-entry guidance, course content, teaching and learning styles and the quality of tutoring
- reduction in the burden of coursework and assessment
- improvements to the college environment and social facilities.

The impact of part-time employment was emphasised more strongly by staff than students. Although language and learning support needs were not identified as the most important factor in student drop-out findings

suggest that more needs to be done to encourage greater take-up of learning support.

The difficulties in obtaining survey responses from withdrawn students highlight the shortcomings in colleges' arrangements for obtaining information on student destinations. As the next chapter shows, more effective procedures need to be developed for following up student absence and withdrawal, and providing exit guidance. Colleges also need to increase their efforts to maintain contact with withdrawn students, help them to continue to study and encourage them to return.

Colleges need to analyse and make available information on attendance and withdrawal in a way which enables students most at risk to be identified early, and which establishes clear patterns of absence and withdrawal in relation to age, gender, mode of attendance and programme area so the accurate comparisons can be drawn. Colleges are recommended to include the improvement of retention within their strategic objectives, to identify targets and formulate action plans and allocate resources for development projects.

Chapter 3

Using destinations data to improve guidance and support

Muriel Green and Jackie Sadler

Introduction

This project focused on colleges' use of destinations data, and sought to check the hypothesis that:

- colleges are losing potential students by not effectively tracking and recording destinations data
- colleges can make better use of this information to identify those factors to which they can respond, e.g. by improving their guidance and support systems.

The 1996 FEFC national survey report* indicated that practice in the collection and use of destinations data in the sector is very diverse in relation to:

- the type of information sought and the detail of the classification
- the comprehensiveness of the coverage
- the timing of the collection.

Fewer than half of the colleges surveyed in the report collected destination data from early leavers.

* FEFC (1996) Students' destinations: college procedures and practices FEFC

Perhaps more significantly the report noted that there was more emphasis on the collection of data than on their use. The report suggested that colleges give higher priority to using student destinations data as a measure of the quality of provision and services and should scrutinise the data rigorously as a basis for enhancing the advice and guidance offered to students.

A FEDA survey of colleges' careers education and guidance in 1996*, found that while 88% of colleges were using destination data to market the institution's provision, and 67% to record achievement, only 55% were using their data to plan the curriculum, and 50% to plan careers education.

Approaches to collecting destination data were not necessarily systematic. In some cases this had not been seen as a high priority by senior managers and few colleges were satisfied with the effectiveness of their systems. There were concerns about the accuracy, comprehensiveness and usefulness of what was being collected in relation to both the timing and method.

Nine colleges took part in the urban colleges project. They were asked systematically to collect and record the destinations of students who completed programmes and those who left early. Colleges followed up completers and early leavers using a questionnaire designed to collect the following information:

- current status
- reasons for leaving (either early or on completion of a one-year programme)
- future ambitions
- type and perceived quality of information and support received at entry/on programme/before leaving
- support and guidance needed.

College representatives analysed their findings and used them to review and evaluate their guidance and support provision, then recommend actions they might take to improve student retention and achievement.

* Sadler, J and Reisenberger A (1996) **On course for next steps: careers education and guidance for students in FE**. FEDA. Approximately 200 colleges responded to the survey.

The questionnaire and guidance notes are included in Appendices F and G and may serve as a model that other colleges can adapt for their own use.

Collecting destinations data

Colleges used their ISR data to establish student destinations before contacting a sample of students who had completed their course, and of early leavers to look in more detail at students' reasons for moving on.

Existing systems

Although one college came into the project with a coherent and comprehensive whole-college system for collecting destinations data, most had fragmented and/or complex systems which often involved many staff. There were also some inconsistencies in the interpretation of the term 'destinations' and in the level and kind of information collected on students who leave. The distinction was often unclear, for example, between the destinations of students who had completed their programme of study and left college, and those who had progressed to another course of study at the college.

Individual managers, such as the Head of Careers or the MIS manager, often had a central responsibility for recording, and sometimes also for collecting, destinations data. Colleges usually drew destinations data relating to students on advanced programmes from UCAS, supplemented by details supplied by tutors. Information on destinations of students on non-advanced programmes tended to come from a variety of sources: directly from peers, from teaching staff, the careers service or other colleges. The reliability of such data was sometimes questionable. Most colleges tried to obtain data on actual destinations when examination results were announced, either by sending recording forms by post or by completing them face-to-face. Response rates were often poor, sometimes as low as 20%. Where destinations information was collected over several months without clear recording systems, there was also a danger that data on intended destinations became confused with data on actual destinations.

Initial responsibility for following up early leavers mainly lay with tutors. This was generally done by telephone or by using follow-up cards between one and four weeks after the first instance of non-attendance. In some cases colleges used codes on registers to indicate reasons for drop-out which could then be entered onto FEMIS. Some colleges, particularly those which had recently undergone mergers, had no common procedures for identifying, following up and logging early leavers. In other colleges each programme area was responsible for following up their own students and worked to different procedures. In smaller institutions, such as sixth-form colleges, exit interviews might be the responsibility of a senior manager, for example the vice principal.

There were concerns among colleges about:

- how far tutors were fulfilling their responsibility to follow-up non-attenders
- whether documentation relating to withdrawal was being completed
- the accuracy of the data being collected
- the tendency among students in the 17-year-old cohort to use reductions in course hours for paid part-time work rather than study.

Some colleges participating in the project had already begun to review existing data collection systems. In some cases they were taking positive steps to share information with other agencies.

Staff in the Registry record data centrally, which is then made available via the college's MIS system. The data is fed in from several sources, including the local careers service, the students themselves and tutors. Data collected matches ISR requirements and is recorded for each student on an annual basis (thus allowing 'multiple destinations' to be entered for students across several years).

Information entered on to the MIS can be interrogated for a variety of purposes. The college shares data with the careers service (included in the service level agreement) and is made available to the TEC as appropriate, as well as being used for the ISR and PISA, and for internal guidance, advice and marketing initiatives.

Others were working towards a more systematic approach to following up and documenting destinations of early leavers including:

- establishing clearly documented procedures for dealing with early leavers
- drafting early leavers' documentation
- re-assigning the follow up of early leavers to administrative staff, for example in one college programme area administrators were responsible for checking registers, interviewing early leavers and referring them to careers specialists as necessary
- undertaking a partial or comprehensive follow-up, usually by telephone, of early leavers.

One college already has an early leavers' procedure and associated documentation in place. This requires students wishing to leave while still on programme to undertake certain actions such as signing off at the library; it also records who gave them advice on their next steps. Every student who drops out is interviewed by a senior tutor, and a variety of options are explored, including alternative programmes in college and referral to the careers officer to discuss options outside the college.

Starting in October each year, a number of paid volunteers, who are non-teaching staff, follow up those who have left during the previous year. The volunteers are briefed on the computer system and use hand-free telephones. Enrolment numbers are used to link back to the ISR.

Designing and using an improved process

Since 1997 is the first year that destination data is required on the ISR, colleges were having to re-organise their systems to incorporate this. While this often led to short-term problems with availability of student destination data, it offered colleges the opportunity to design improved procedures and systems.

Colleges' experience of using the FEDA survey confirmed that qualitative information was most effectively collected through personal contact with students (either by telephone or face-to-face) rather than by post.

Crosschecking information was useful in revealing discrepancies between MIS and ISR data and UCAS information, or reasons for leaving given by students. Sharing information with other agencies also helped improve accuracy. One college compared ISR data with that collected through follow-up interviews as part of the FEDA project and found:

> *The survey appeared to highlight a large proportion of errors contained within the college database. Of the records of the total project population (247):*
>
> - *27 (10%) did not have a phone number entered at all*
> - *63 (28% of 220) appeared to be entered incorrectly*
> - *somewhat embarrassingly, 11 students deemed to have withdrawn (two as late as February) had not in fact enrolled in the first place*
> - *to the initial consternation of some parents, 23 students flagged as withdrawn, were in fact still in the college on their original course.*

Another reported:

> *ISR data indicated that only 8% of early leavers were dissatisfied with their course. However, follow-up showed that 24% of early leavers were dissatisfied with their course and 22% dissatisfied with the college.*

The project colleges were provided with a detailed questionnaire, guidance on its use, and help in training targeted staff to implement follow-up interviews, but in most cases there was a significant time lapse between students leaving and being followed up. Difficulties were largely a result of staffing limitations: who could do the follow-up interviews; where, when and how would they be supported? When attempts were made to contact students up to six months later, the delay was felt to limit the effectiveness of the process. Colleges which employed or trained support staff to make follow-up calls were most successful in eliciting useful information.

Selecting and training staff

The selection and training of those undertaking the follow-up work is crucial as it can affect:

- the veracity of student responses
- the accuracy of data collected
- the costs of collecting data.

Participating colleges had tried, with varying levels of success, using a variety of staff to follow up students including careers staff, college guidance and support staff, other students, university students or ex-students. One college using ex-students to contact early leavers found that the students were not prepared to admit they had left. Another had combined the interview with an offer of support to the students in deciding their next steps, in the hope that this would encourage students to participate in the process.

As indicated above, close identification with the college can discourage honest responses, even when tutors themselves are not involved in the work. On the other hand, external staff need to be adequately briefed about the college and its systems, staffing and structures, to be able to understand responses and probe these where necessary. Those associated with the college, but seen as independent, may be best placed to undertake the work, for example careers advisors. Depending on the experience of those recruited, interviewers may also need training in a range of guidance skills, including active listening, probing and summarising. They also need to be familiar with the back-up support the college can provide. During the project, college representatives were introduced to the 'Front Line Pack'*, which included useful exercises to develop basic guidance skills.

Costs

The process of collecting information on leavers is resource intensive, sometimes with a poor 'strike rate'. It can be expensive, even where administrative rather than academic staff are used. One college reported:

* DfEE (1996) **Developing the front line.** DfEE

Taking into consideration wasted telephone dialling and calls, about three productive interviews per hour are being achieved. This produces 10 productive interviews per three-hour session, at a cost of £6.50 per hour plus telephone charges. Roughly each interview costs £2.00.

In spite of this, colleges believed that the overall benefits of following up students outweighed the costs.

Following up students

Tracking down students, who can be very mobile in urban areas, proved difficult for many colleges. As a result, the numbers followed up in the course of the project were small, and the research therefore not conclusive. In one area, some had been taken into custody and were in prison. One college reported difficulty in accessing ESOL students, including children of recent arrivals to the UK, because of frequent changes in housing and difficulty with language.

Colleges found that they were more successful in reaching leavers if calls were made:

- as soon as possible after the student had left the college
- early evening rather than during office hours.

Once contact with the leaver had been established, there was no lack of co-operation One college reported that 99% of their students would provide information requested (although the veracity of the responses cannot be assured).

Careful handling is required when calls are answered by other family members: one college found that in several cases the parents did not know that the student had dropped out of the college. There was also some concern about the acceptability of information provided by a friend or relative. Colleges need to address these issues when designing training for those undertaking the follow-up interviews.

Information elicited

Colleges were encouraged to add more detail to the FEDA questionnaire to suit their own purposes. The level of detail requested by external bodies about student destinations is often insufficient to be of real use to colleges. For example, the annual PISA return, with just 'employment' as an option, gives no indication as to whether the course of study undertaken has helped the student enter employment.

If destination data is to be used to improve provision, more specific questions need to be asked about the students' chosen destinations: if they entered employment, why did they do so, did they talk to anybody about rearranging their studies to fit in with their new work commitments? More detailed information on employment entered by students could be useful to colleges in their marketing, curriculum planning and in the design of career education programmes.

Key messages on collecting destinations data

- Colleges should clarify the purposes of destination data, agree what to collect and ensure that all staff have a common understanding
- Simple systems are needed which clearly specify staff responsibilities and timescales for data collection.
- Systems need to be flexible enough to gather information on students of all ages on programmes with different modes of delivery.
- Careful selection and thorough training and briefing of those following up students is essential if reliable and useful data are to be collected.
- Findings need to be widely available internally so that appropriate staff can use them as necessary.
- For effective follow-up, students need to be contacted as soon as possible after they have left the college.
- A multi-agency approach can avoid students being asked the same questions, and provide an opportunity to draw on a wider pool of data.

Exploiting destinations data

If colleges are to respond effectively to information on student withdrawal they need to be sure that their destinations data are accurate. When considering the reasons for student withdrawal it is also important for colleges to bear in mind that:

- withdrawal does not necessarily mean failure on the part of the students: they may progress onto other more appropriate programmes or into rewarding work
- nor does it necessarily mean the college has failed: there may be factors beyond its control.

Nonetheless the project identified factors to which colleges could respond, particularly by enhancing their guidance and support, or reviewing their curriculum structures and delivery.

Identifying trends in student destinations

The follow-up interviews produced a wide range of information on student destinations. The complex picture makes it difficult to pinpoint precisely what tipped the balance and caused particular students to leave. As one college commented:

> *There were a total of 108 reasons given for leaving by the 70 respondents:*
>
> - *59% cited 'dissatisfied with the course' (13% related directly to pre-entry guidance. A further 18% thought that the course was too hard)*
> - *34% said that they had not met the entry requirements*
> - *45% expressed interest in returning to college – only 18% gave an unequivocal 'no'.*

It was not possible to establish any reasons for drop-out that were specific to urban colleges.

Reasons given for drop-out paralleled those given in the large survey reported in Chapter 2. They include:

- incorrect expectations of the course (sometimes the result of parental and family pressure)
- lack of motivation on the part of students
- a history of poor attendance at school
- poor attendance at college and failure to keep up with the course workload
- failure to return to college after breaks in the college year
- students' accepting places at more than one institution and withdrawing at the beginning of the course
- financial problems, particularly among young people receiving little or no financial assistance from their parents
- late start on the course (although it was difficult to establish whether drop-out was because of lack of commitment on the part of the student or colleges' inadequate induction arrangements for late starters)
- poor social facilities at college
- problems with travel.

Staff in the project colleges were asked what they believed to be important factors influencing students to stay or leave the college.

Several colleges claimed that the extent to which students met entry requirements was an important factor in drop-out. For example, one reported that in two of th groups followed up, 'notable proportions of leavers had only average or poor GCSE profiles for the courses studied or enrolled on'. Another college reported that it was intending to establish minimum entry requirements for GNVQ Intermediate students. Another common feature was the higher withdrawal rate from lower level courses. In most cases drop-out was affecting some programmes more than others.

Several colleges were concerned that students were dropping out because they were not achieving, and needed assistance with, basic skills. The adequacy of additional support was of concern in at least two cases.

Some leavers who could afford to continue studying were not prepared to do so as it meant sacrificing their social life. Discretionary grants policies

of local councils varied: in one case the generosity of the Council grants meant that financial reward for this group of students was a positive inducement to attend college.

Ethnicity was not reported as a significant factor in early withdrawal, although some communities have traditions whereby students are taken away for several weeks at a time (for example, Asian students may visit relations or undertake pilgrimages abroad). These students may subsequently drop out because they are unable to catch up with the work.

A number of colleges reported that since incorporation, prospective students and their parents had become aware of the greater choice of institution and programme. As a result, students were travelling further afield to study, sometimes without adequate consideration to the time and cost involved.

At least one college reported students leaving at 17 and returning to college at 18 or 19. At another 45% of early leavers expressed an interest in returning to college at a later date. This suggests that some students at this age may take time to settle on a clear career direction and start achieving at college; firm intentions at enrolment can be quite different 12 months later.

There was also evidence within the study to indicate that the quality of teaching and support from staff are influential in retaining students.

> *A significant factor in whether a student continues with their course or returns is if they find the quality of teaching good with varied and interesting lessons. The college is continuing in 1997–8 its programme of staff development on differentiation and teaching and learning styles. This is compulsory for all staff. There is also to be peer observation of classroom teaching in addition to that which already takes place for staff appraisal. The other strategy that the college has adopted to ensure effective teaching is to audit all courses on a two-year cycle.*

The most common factors affecting withdrawal were:

- the problem of travelling – particularly in the Greater London area
- dissatisfaction with the course.

One college recorded:

> *Disliked the course content was the most cited reason for leaving (about 26%). Journey too difficult was the next most quoted reason for leaving.*

Key messages on student withdrawal

- While colleges identified some common causes for withdrawal, for example travelling and dissatisfaction with courses, in many cases causes were more specific to the individual institution.
- Students frequently drop out of their course because it does not meet their expectations. Colleges need to provide clear and accurate information to students at interview to ensure they have a realistic view of what their course involves.
- Where travel is an issue, the cost and time involved need to be discussed with students at admissions interviews.
- Because of the increased sense of competition since incorporation, particularly in urban areas served by a number of different providers, colleges may recruit students to inappropriate courses rather than risk losing them to a neighbouring competitor. Urban colleges need to enter an agreement to improve the rigour of admissions interviews for the benefit of learners and urban colleges.
- Despite similar circumstances, some students drop out while others do not. This may relate to the extent to which they have developed individual coping strategies. Colleges may want to consider how all students can be encouraged to develop these skills.

- Studies on student destinations are useful to colleges in highlighting reasons for student withdrawal and identifying action to improve student retention and achievement. However, this area of work has not generally been accorded a high enough priority to allow detailed research. Longitudinal studies would help to establish whether students who withdraw return to learning at a later date.

Improving guidance and support provision

Good guidance and pastoral support are extremely important for students. The results of the project suggest that some less confident young people find the size and complexity of colleges overwhelming. Colleges need to consider how the transition from school to college can be facilitated, for example by offering tasters or link programmes, by using student 'buddies', or through college staff working in schools.

Guidance needs to be available to students at each stage in order to ensure they can make the best possible choice of programme, but also to enable those who feel they have made the wrong choice to change direction.

All colleges involved in the project felt there were steps they could take to improve student retention by developing their current guidance and support, and by reviewing their curriculum, and could give examples of initiatives they were developing.

Threshold services

In some colleges the admissions process is undertaken autonomously by programme areas. In such cases, staff providing central support services may be poorly informed of recruitment processes and excluded from playing a part.

Other colleges have central procedures laid down and documented, and have produced checklists for admissions interviews. In some cases

department admissions tutors are linked to a central admissions team which offers training, support and administrative back-up. One college had been working to improve inter-course referral to ensure that students did not have to repeat the admissions procedures if they wanted to change course.

Another college had managed to reduce drop-out on their GCSE programme, by introducing a 'Stepping Stones' programme. This requires potential students who achieve disappointing GCSE results to undertake a four-day [illegible]anced guidance programme, which encourages them to broaden o[illegible]ns and re-assess their goals where appropriate. Particular problems on GCSE resit courses identified by staff at the college included students' lack of self-esteem and boredom with repetition of the same material. Drop-out was also being addressed by introducing a minimum entry requirement for the programme. Last year 88% of students on the programme completed.

Another college made arrangements for pupils leaving GCSE courses in schools at Easter to begin college during the summer term.

One college found that over two-thirds of the early leavers contacted had enrolled at or after enrolment week, suggesting that the advice and guidance available to these students at enrolment and during induction was inadequate. One college reported that 20% of their early leavers claimed to have received no guidance at all, and only 26% indicated that they had seen a specialist careers or guidance adviser.

Further findings from the project suggest that:

- The pressure on curriculum areas to meet recruitment targets is at variance with the need to paint a realistic picture of the course. This supports the case for involving a cross-college guidance unit in admissions procedures.
- All potential students should visit the college, even if interviewed first at school.
- It is important to ensure that applicants have an accurate perception of the programme for which they have applied.

- Use of admissions checklists can encourage consistent approaches to interviewing, and ensure that nothing is omitted.
- Uncertainty about career paths can lead students to sign up for inappropriate courses, especially when staff enrolling them do not have the time or skills to give adequate guidance.
- Potential problems, for example a long or expensive journey, should be identified and discussed with applicants.
- Early identification of students 'at risk' of dropping out may encourage closer monitoring once on-programme.

On-programme guidance

All students, including late entrants, need proper induction. Some colleges already have late induction processes or arrangements for inducting students joining after September. In some cases senior tutors take inductions for groups of late entrants across a programme area.

> *At one institution, comments from a tutor indicated that students who start on programmes late may be at risk of dropping out because they have missed the normal induction process. In one case, this was because the student was continually getting lost in the college. There may also be a general problem with tutors concerned to get through the programme, not having enough time to help students to catch up individually. The college explored how:*
>
> - *student services could support late entrants by organising inductions to the institution*
> - *tutors could support late entrants to their programme areas by approaching selected existing students to act as 'study buddies'.*

Concerns about consistency in tutorial provision had encouraged some colleges within the project to:

- work with tutors to enhance their input, including providing additional training for tutors

- develop a system for delivering tutorial support through specialists with the tutorial programme managed centrally or via 'super' tutors.

The project findings also emphasised the need to identify students 'at risk' at an early stage so that appropriate support could be provided. One college reported that:

> *A significant number of early leavers chose not to inform anyone of their problems, but simply stopped coming to college. Those who did choose to inform a member of staff often received scant attention.*

Another college reported that 26% just drifted away.

Early interventions can help prevent drop-out, and guidance should not be used as a last resort. Tutors need to be approachable so that early negotiations can take place with a student if s/he is obliged to miss classes. Guidelines on dealing with non-attendance should be included in tutor checklists. Staff development programmes should include training on:

- monitoring students 'at risk'
- procedures for following up absences
- dealing with unauthorised absences
- student referral where specialist support is needed.

If students are reluctant to discuss course change with personal tutors, the availability of specialist support may encourage them to seek guidance. Some colleges have a system of referral to senior tutors or college careers specialists, who can provide specialist support and an impartial view.

Preparation for leaving college

Several colleges were concerned at the low awareness of the pre-exit guidance service among students they had followed up. Students cannot always absorb all the information they receive about support services during induction. It is vital therefore that tutors reinforce this throughout the year.

One college commented:

> *A worrying number of leavers (36%) appear to have been ignorant of the ways in which the college could help them, when things became difficult. Twenty eight per cent of respondents were aware that they could approach their tutor or a trained counsellor and the remainder knew only that they could turn to their tutor.*

Another also reported that tutors or senior tutors were the main source of advice and support to students in finding acceptable alternatives when they wanted to leave their course. There appears to be ineffective use of careers specialists, either employed by the college or through the careers service provider, in advising students who are about to withdraw, and insufficient referral procedures.

In another instance the research indicated that a significant number of completers had progressed to other institutions, and that 18% of early leavers would have liked to have been told about other courses or alternative ways to study. Immediate contact and appropriate guidance could have led to re-enrolment in some colleges. Colleges may want to consider ways in which they can enhance pre-exit guidance on progression routes. One college, for example, had included in their college charter a student entitlement to a review interview.

Key messages

- Colleges need to establish clear and integrated recruitment procedures, which include minimum entry requirements, where appropriate, to ensure that students are recruited onto the most appropriate programme and are fully aware of the demands of the course and college.
- Colleges in urban areas where competition for students is fierce, need collectively to agree to use integrity in recruiting students and ensure they are placed on courses that are appropriate to their needs.
- Induction needs to be available to all students, regardless of when they join the college.

- Institutions need to increase students' awareness of the guidance and support available to them to encourage early access to support systems. The ethos of the college needs to stress that asking for help is the norm, rather than the exception.
- Colleges need to ensure early and consistent responses to non-attendance.
- Identifying and monitoring students 'at risk' need be included as part of staff development for tutors.
- Immediate follow-up of absence can prevent difficulties which manifest themselves in failed deadlines, lack of progress, and eventual drop-out.
- Adequate guidance on progression routes needs to be given to those on one-year programmes at an early enough stage to avoid crisis careers counselling later on.

Conclusions

The project findings indicate that all colleges could take positive action to influence student drop-out. Several colleges considered that action they planned would have a significant impact on improving retention, and two colleges had already taken action by the end of the project.

As one college reported:

> *Forty-one per cent of learners said that there was nothing the college could have done or done differently that would have made them stay. This must mean that there is a chance of retaining 60% of the sample, or two out of three early leavers could perhaps be helped to stay.*

Action being taken, or under consideration by colleges as a result of the research, included:

In relation to the collection and exploitation of destination data:

- tightening up on the collection of data at the end of the academic year by:
  - giving clear deadlines to tutors collecting information at the end of July and setting a target for exit interviews

  - following up unknown destinations early in September
  - drawing up a schedule for the input of destination data onto the MIS, so that it does not clash with the input of enrolment data
  - linking collection of destination data to confirmation of addresses when sending out certificates

- moving responsibility for data collection and verification to another section, which will undertake more systematic follow-up procedures
- improving communication between interested parties (MIS, careers, etc.)
- streamlining processes and practices
- strengthening the register system through computerisation to ensure that all schools receive regular attendance reports.

In relation to guidance and support:

- introducing a new system for reviewing student progress in order to improve support for students with their studies and ensure more systematic exit guidance
- checking the basic skills screening results of early leavers to identify if they are leaving because courses are too difficult or easy for them
- expanding the college's mentoring scheme
- increasing where possible the financial and childcare support
- including targets for all Heads of School to establish clear progression aims for all courses
- introducing rewards for students who attend well.

Colleges also intended to follow up the work undertaken on the project by:

- checking on courses with high drop-out rates in 1997/8, to ascertain whether these match those in 1996/7
- researching further into courses with low retention rates identified by the project.

A checklist, based on the recommendations and actions of the project colleges is included in Appendix H. It is designed to help colleges review their present systems for collecting destinations data, and consider actions they might take as a result.

Chapter 4

Conclusions

This section outlines the key messages emerging from each of the three projects, and highlights some common themes and issues.

Key messages from the projects

Additional support

Colleges taking part in this project were positive about the FEFC's introduction of additional support funding as part of their funding methodology. All colleges taking part in this project agreed that identifying and responding to students' additional support needs are crucial to improving student retention and achievement.

Colleges are using a wide range of initial and diagnostic assessment methods to screen students. There are varying views on the relative merits of the different assessment schemes in use, indicating that there is still work to be done on developing these.

The results of screening show that large numbers of students need additional support. To meet this demand a shift of responsibility is needed from specialist to mainstream staff. All staff need to be aware of students' additional support needs and to be able to address these through their mainstream teaching. The staff development implications are considerable.

Although colleges recognise the need to provide additional support in ways that are most appropriate to students' needs, in some cases their decisions are influenced by funding considerations and the need to satisfy FEFC requirements for claiming additional support units.

In order to monitor the effect of additional support provision and to claim funding, efficient tracking systems are needed. Most colleges admit their systems need further development.

Methods of calculating additional support claims vary. There is real concern among colleges that different interpretations of the FEFC guidance on claiming additional support units mean that some colleges are winners while others are losers. Colleges are concerned that, even where claims are maximised, more students need support than can be funded from FEFC additional support units. Low ALF colleges are concerned that the real value of their additional support units is reduced even though the costs of meeting their students' needs is as great as in high ALF colleges.

Student retention

Although it was difficult to draw firm conclusions on reasons for drop-out in relation to specific courses and groups of students, colleges taking part in this project were able to identify factors that might cause students to withdraw. Among the most significant factors were:

- student motivation and commitment
- unrealistic expectations of their course
- lack of self-esteem and confidence
- personal and financial difficulties.

Young adults in the 19–25 age group appear to experience multiple difficulties and therefore to be particularly at risk. Many early leavers moved on to courses elsewhere or into employment; for the individuals concerned, even if not for the college, this is a 'positive outcome'.

If colleges are to improve student retention they need comprehensive and reliable information on student destinations and reasons for drop-out. They also need to improve their procedures for following up students who have withdrawn. Colleges may be able to find ways of supporting students who are experiencing difficulties and enabling them to continue their studies or return at a later date.

By analysing destinations data colleges should also be able to establish trends, identify students most 'at risk' and take pre-emptive steps to prevent drop-out.

Improving guidance and support

This project confirmed many of the findings from the previous project, in particular the importance of systematically collecting accurate and comprehensive data on student destinations. As well as confirming the significance of student motivation as a reason for drop-out, it found that the distance and cost of travelling to college was one of the most widespread reasons for withdrawal.

In order to collect and exploit data efficiently colleges need to ensure that all staff are clear about roles in collecting and recording data. Information needs to be accurate, timely and easily accessible to all those who need it. Collaboration with other agencies can help avoid duplication of effort and can increase the overall pool of information .

Although collecting destinations data and following up students who have withdrawn is resource intensive, the benefits outweigh the costs.

All colleges can take actions to boost student retention by improving their guidance and support systems at entry, on programme and pre-exit and by reviewing their curriculum delivery.

Common themes

The following common themes emerged from the study, some of which are touched on above.

- Colleges need to develop their information systems so that they can collect and record appropriate and accurate information, and make this available to those who need it.
- Curriculum and support staff and those working in MIS all need to work together if information is to be gathered efficiently, student need diagnosed and appropriate support provided. All three projects uncovered discrepancies between MIS data and more detailed data uncovered by the research.
- All colleges can take actions to develop the support and guidance they provide for students and improve retention.
- More staff need to be aware of the range of students' additional needs. They need to be able to diagnose and meet these needs, and refer students to specialist help where appropriate. In many cases colleges will need to devise staff development programmes to raise staff awareness and develop their skills.
- The quality of teaching and tutorial support is crucial in motivating, supporting and retaining students. In some cases staff will need to develop new approaches to teaching and learning and new ways of delivering the curriculum to meet the needs and expectations of particular groups of students.
- Colleges need to respond strategically to the issue of student retention by identifying objectives and targets, formulating actions plans and allocating appropriate resources.
- Studies of the kind undertaken by FEDA with the project colleges are useful in highlighting withdrawal issues and indicating action that can be taken. However, this area of work has not generally been accorded a high priority. Detailed research is required to achieve maximum benefit. It would be useful to undertake longitudinal studies to identify whether those who leave at 17 return to study at a later date.

Coherent strategies for early identification of need and follow-up

Colleges need to develop coherent strategies for identifying student need early and following this up. Although many are developing a wide range of initiatives to support students and reduce drop-out, these are not always part of an overall strategy. Colleges should identify objectives and targets, formulate action plans to achieve these, identify teams of staff to implement the action plans, and allocate appropriate resources.

Key questions for colleges include:

- What data is to be collected and for what purpose?
- When will information be collected, how and by whom?
- Where will the information be held and who will have access to it?
- How can the data be used and systems set up to identify students most at risk of dropping out?
- Which staff should be involved in identifying students' educational needs? Are they clear on staff roles?
- How can colleges ensure that students who withdraw from college are followed up quickly?
- What additional support and guidance can be offered, and curriculum changes made, to encourage students to stay?

Funding and financial considerations

The research into colleges' systems for tracking and claiming additional learning support units highlights the importance of colleges being fully aware of available sources of funding, and maximising their claims.

Colleges need to keep abreast of changes in regulations relating to family and income support, and employment benefit, and anticipate at an early stage the likely impact on students. With early planning, courses can be adapted and support systems put in place to enable students to continue studying while claiming benefit.

The urban dimension: is it significant?

Although it was difficult to identify factors affecting retention that were specific to urban colleges, certain issues raised by the research are more likely to be experienced by students in urban areas. However, the colleges surveyed had, on average, levels of additional support and retention rates around the national norm for general FE colleges in 1995–6.

The survey shows that withdrawn students are more likely to experience financial hardship, personal problems such as homelessness, emotional and family problems: all are problems associated with urban deprivation.

The high levels of unemployment often associated with the urban labour market can encourage students to withdraw from college at the first opportunity of employment. Lack of job prospects at the end of a prolonged period of study can also demotivate students and cause them to withdraw early.

Ethnic groups are more likely to be concentrated in urban areas. Difficulties experienced by particular groups are therefore likely to be more prevalent in urban colleges. Among Asian families, social constraints

and high expectations of academic achievement without appropriate support in college may lead to drop-out. The socio-economic characteristics of black ethnic groups may manifest themselves in personal difficulties. Some of these groups may be in particular need of language support, especially asylum seekers or those with refugee status.

The wider choice of colleges in urban areas can also have a detrimental effect on retention. Students are sometimes encouraged to travel further than is practical, and take on journeys which they quickly realise are both time-consuming and expensive. The research also shows that competition between providers can lead colleges to recruit students to inappropriate courses rather than lose them to competitors, and that drop-out is likely to result. Colleges have highlighted the need for a co-ordinated, planned approach to post-16 provision in large urban areas. Colleges should collectively address the issue of retention, and improve the rigour of their admissions procedures by entering into agreements on minimum standards.

The evidence on students switching to other institutions, moving into employment, or trying to combine part-time study and employment, suggests that the urban student population is more mobile and ready to exercise choice when the opportunity arises. Many of the students are not lost to the education and training system, although they have dropped out of individual colleges. Colleges may be wasting valuable marketing opportunities by making it difficult for students to switch courses inside their (often large) institutions, and by not offering enough lifelines for students to drop back into learning.

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Appendices

Appendix A:

Background to FEFC funding of additional support

Basic skills or ESOL may be:

- the student's primary learning goal
- additional to a student's primary learning goal
- additional support delivered to a student on a mainstream course.

FEFC defines additional support as:

> *Any activity that provides direct support for learning to individual students, over and above that which is normally provided in a standard learning programme which leads to their primary learning goal ... The need for additional support may arise from a learning difficulty or disability or from literacy, numeracy or language support requirements.*
>
> **How to apply for funding 1997-8.** FEFC 1996 p.31

Additional support funding is not intended to help students with everyday difficulties on their programmes. The FEFC funding guide *How to Apply for Funding 1997-98* explicitly states that 'if the majority of the students in a group appear to require additional help to succeed on their learning programme, then this should be addressed within the design and delivery of the main learning programme or by reconsidering the choice of programme for these students rather than by applying the additional support mechanism'.

The FEFC requires clear evidence of the additional support delivered. The guidelines for institutions and their external auditors, provided in the supplement to FEFC circular 97/18, advise that the area merits special checking by auditors, who should be particularly vigilant in the following cases:

- where large numbers of students just trigger the cost thresholds for each band
- where there are significant increases of additional support claims from year to year
- where the majority of students in a group require additional help.

However, FEFC will assess the evidence in support of unusual claims on an individual basis.

Changes in the FEFC funding methodology for ALS 1997–8

Where additional support is offered, it is important that information is shared with the student and an audit trail is available. For example, the learning agreement could be stapled to the final claim as proof A.

Apart from the addition of two extra bands (bands 6 and 7) at the top of the scale, the bands for additional support will remain the same for next year. The increase will affect students with learning difficulties and disabilities rather than those with basic skills and ESOL support needs. Claims for the latter will fall into Band 0 (which requires expenditure of £170–£500 per year attracting 19 units) and Band 1 (which requires expenditure of

£501–£1,000 per year attracting 42 units). It is important to remember that Band 0 applies solely to students on programmes of fewer than 450 hours, and Band 1 to 5 applies to all students, regardless of the number of hours attended. Colleges will be able to include a depreciation charge for capital equipment. Personal counselling, which has been newly introduced, must be demonstrated as supporting students in achieving their primary learning goal. FEFC's audit guidance for 1997–8 includes instructions to external auditors to check on aspects of additional support.

The Council would normally not expect institutions to:

- *have large numbers of students just triggering cost thresholds for each support band*
- *significantly increase from year to year the proportion of additional support units in the total*
- *claim additional support funding where the majority of students in a group ... require additional help in order for them to succeed on their learning programme*
- *systematically claim for literacy or ESOL qualifications in addition to the primary learning goal of a student.*

FEFC also expects the institution to have retained evidence of costings and actual additional expenditure and of the fact that the additional support was actually made available to the student*

The information provided here gives an outline of additional support and should not be taken as definitive. Please refer to *How to apply for funding 1997-98* (FEFC December 1996) for further guidance.

* **Audit Guidance 1997–98** FEFC pp 63–4.

Appendix B:

Case studies of colleges: additional support

College A

College A is a large, inner-city college which was formed after a recent merger. It serves an area with a rich diversity of cultural backgrounds; however, unemployment, poverty and urban deprivation are high: over 50% of the students receive benefit. Most of its students are over 19 years old and over 50% are African or Afro-Caribbean. Many are refugees and asylum seekers.

In 1996–7 the college had over 7,500 enrolled students of whom 2,500 on substantive part-time and full-time courses sat the BSA screening test. Of these 1,161 were identified as needing support in literacy and ESOL, and 768 as needing numeracy. During induction the students were given a diagnostic assessment which was disguised as an induction assignment. Clear guidelines for marking have been developed. Next year the support tutors will administer the assignments across the college.

To answer the need for learning support the college has top-sliced three hours off all full-time courses. As a result, the college is able to offer over 500 hours of learning support a week. A set number of hours of support is allocated to each school depending on the curriculum areas, size and history of the school. In addition, the college claims between 50,000 and 60,000 support units a year.

Because roughly 50% of the students are on Job Seekers' Allowance the college needs to adhere to a maximum delivery of 16 hours a week. As a result, team teaching and double staffing have been introduced and clear guidelines have been developed to ensure effective delivery.

Some courses which are likely to attract students with basic skills or ESOL needs get automatic support. In addition to group sessions, individual support is available and there are study centres on every site. Each support tutor produces a scheme of delivery, attends staff meetings and is responsible for record keeping. If demand decreases, support tutors are deployed elsewhere. The learning support team tracks student retention and sends out reminders to those who have not attended.

The college has identified the following factors for successful delivery of learning support:

- basic skills and ESOL skills mapping of course requirements
- support integrated into mainstream provision rather than delivered as a 'bolt-on'
- support sessions and classroom teaching timetabled together, avoiding gaps or delivery at the end of the day
- regular student attendance
- staff liaison
- the backing of the mainstream course teams
- staff training for mainstream and support tutors.

The college has clearly defined roles and responsibilities and a management structure to allow for the delivery and monitoring of basic skills and ESOL, dyslexia and learning difficulties support. The Director of Learning Support, who is a member of the senior management team, liaises with her colleagues, such as heads of school.

The college sees central organisation and monitoring as a priority. Management has a key role in data collection and monitoring. The process starts with a complete overview of all college courses and the scores of the student's basic skills assessments for each course. Once the students have been allocated learning support, the support tutor completes paper registers to monitor attendance. These data are input onto MIDAS which is then used to determine whether a student has triggered a claim for support units and to collate the units across the college. The college rated the overall effectiveness of its system as 'good' but commented that MIDAS, while very good at generating accurate and useable data, is not easy to use and that the data merge is complex.

The results of screening, assessment and student reviews underpin support claims as well as provide feedback to staff, in particular to reinforce the message that learning support is important to the overall success of the course. The college has also started to analyse retention and achievement for each group of students.

College B

College B is an inner-city college which had 4,100 part-time and almost 2,000 full-time students in 1996-97. The college already had a range of cross-college learning support before the introduction of additional support and it has attempted to maintain and extend its provision by making the funding mechanism fit existing provision where appropriate. All students are entitled to support and those with a particularly high level of need may qualify for an additional support claim. At the same time staff acknowledge that the gap between students' basic skills and the demands of the course should not be too great otherwise students are unlikely to cope.

Each year the Department of Learning Support receives a central allocation of hours to provide additional support for all students. To provide as many students as possible with access to support, roughly 50% of the hours are offered within the English and Numeracy Centres. The rest is allocated as support for particular groups and individual students. If students need regular learning support then the support tutor and the student agree and sign an Additional Support Agreement (ASA). Sometimes subject tutors make support take-up compulsory for entry onto the course. If the student is resistant, the staff try to find another way of delivering. Many students receive a 'package' made up of different types of support. The college has more demand than it can meet and estimates that £2.5m per year for learning support would be needed if the costs were to be met fully. Academic staff are largely responsible for the additional support cycle, apart from the projection of student numbers for next year's funding cycle and the funding claim.

The college uses a range of tracking systems, all inter-linked, to monitor the quality and effectiveness of support and to provide evidence for funding. The tracking systems include the following features:

- Student record forms are completed when the students first visit one of the English and Numeracy Centres. The data are entered onto the Swipes database.
- The database is used to allocate swipe cards for monitoring future attendance. The system used to read the swipe cards is called Pipistrel.
- The swipe card system enables the college to log student attendance and alerts staff if students are not attending for their agreed hours.
- Swipe card records also allow the college to spot those students who are attending the English and Numeracy Centre on a regular basis but without an ASA. If the tutor and the student agree that regular support is indeed required, then the ASA form can be backdated.
- The database is linked to the central FEMIS system. Keying in the student's name is sufficient to gain access to the student's full enrolment details.
- The database allows the college to generate an overview of the students who are receiving support and to assess how well the college meets the needs of different groups within the college. For instance, 547 regular students were attending the English and Numeracy Centre in the period up to April 1997. Of these 238 were in Business, Leisure and Technology; 151 in General and Creative Education; and 148 in Hospitality, Catering and Tourism. Workshop types, first language, age and gender can also be extracted.
- Finally, MIDAS is used to generate tariff bands and additional support claims.

The college has information sheets aimed at all staff to explain what support is on offer and how it is provided. Students can use the English and Numeracy Centre on a regular basis, on a drop-in basis and to use the resource material. Staff can also use the centre for advice and information on materials for integrating support with the main programme. Each

Programme Area has a named link tutor to follow up any queries about students, support, etc.. This tutor attends course meetings, carries out diagnostic assessments and arranges induction visits to tutorial groups.

The college is piloting a feedback system to group tutors to gain comments on the improvement in the students' skills as a result of the support they have received. The college also asks the students using the English & Numeracy Centres to evaluate the provision.

Appendix C:

Case studies of students: additional support

Case study A

John is a 17-year-old student doing GNVQ Business (Advanced) and A-level modular maths. He was statemented at school because of severe problems with reading and spelling. The educational psychologist's assessment showed that he had a reading age of 8 years. He scored 117 on the IQ test.

John had an hour's support throughout the academic year as well as a reader for exams. Because he has had considerable one-to-one attention, the college will be able to claim support units.

Case study B

Tamara and Yvonne are twin sisters who appeared to have no problems at school yet failed GCSE English and maths and scored low on the college screening test. Following further assessment, their reading and spelling quotients were found to be: RQ 85 and 80; and SQ 73 and 82. They were timetabled for additional support to their A-level Art course and GCSE resits, but illness and an awkward journey to the college caused their attendance to tail off. They will not trigger funding. Both failed their GCSEs again in the summer of 1997.

Case study C

Although Tim had got good GCSEs at school, including B for English, he had scored fairly low on college screening and his A-level tutors soon noticed problems with his written work. The assessment confirmed that spelling was a real problem so support for written work was arranged during his first year at college and he was given extra time in exams. Tim had a lot of support and the college claimed additional support funding for that year. By the second year he had improved to the point where he only needed occasional help with his basic skills. Since his A-level results were poor he resat them in 1997 and got two As for Theatre and Media studies.

Case study D

Ahmed is a 20-year-old Somali student who is doing an HND in Engineering. He speaks English fluently but his strong accent makes it difficult to understand him and, as a consequence, he is not confident enough to ask for clarification when he needs it. His tutors noticed that he could keep up with the course work but that he found it really hard to do assignments. He got access to learning support but often did not attend when he had assignments to do. The college will not be able to submit a support claim.

Appendix D:

Checklist to help achieve effective support delivery and claim submission

Delivery

Review to check if you have the following in place:

- mapping of basic skills and ESOL entry and exit requirements for mainstream courses
- support integrated into mainstream provision rather than delivered as a 'bolt-on'
- support sessions and classroom teaching time-tabled together, avoiding gaps and delivery late in the day
- systems to monitor student attendance
- liaison between all staff
- the backing of the mainstream course teams
- staff training for mainstream and support tutors.

Tracking

Review to check if you have the information you need to:

- justify additional support claims
- provide feedback to support and mainstream staff
- analyse retention and achievement for groups of students
- demonstrate added-value.

If you do not, you will need to:

- Set up tracking systems. In doing this you should:
  - review if you have sufficiently large numbers of students with support needs to justify computer-based systems
  - bear in mind that most colleges use paper registers for classroom monitoring and computerised tracking
  - be aware that, although computerised systems are undoubtedly the most efficient solution in the long term, there are usually teething problems when installing new systems. Keep old systems and methods in place until you are sure that the new one is working properly. (Case study B in Appendix B gives a description of advanced computerised monitoring.)

Management

- establish clear roles and responsibilities for those involved with additional support
- make sure that the senior management team is involved with additional support
- set up good communication channels between management, finance sections and academic staff
- provide course tutors with access to information on attendance and progress of students
- make support teachers aware of the funding mechanism and its implications for delivery
- develop mainstream teachers' awareness of students' basic skills and ESOL and the added-value of support to retention and achievement
- make sure that learning support is relevant to the requirements of the mainstream course.

Appendix E:

Student profiles by age, gender and ethnicity

Figure 1 **Profile of current v. withdrawn students by age**

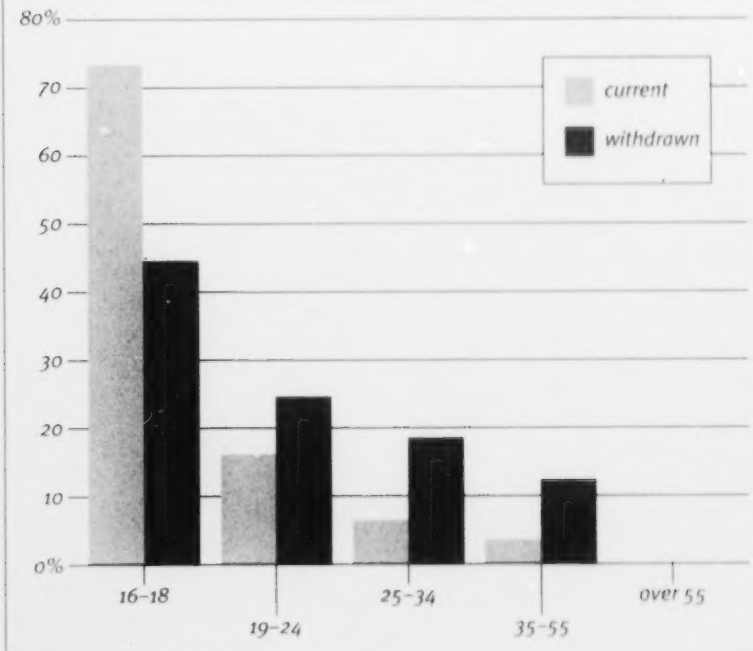


Figure 2 **Profile of current v. withdrawn students by gender**

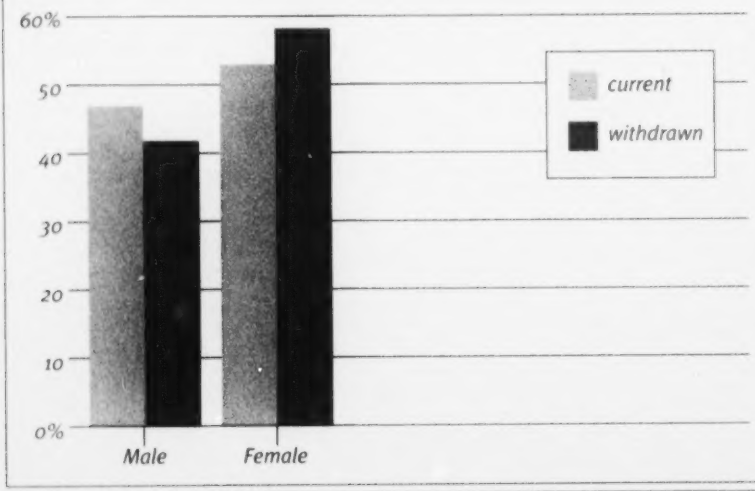
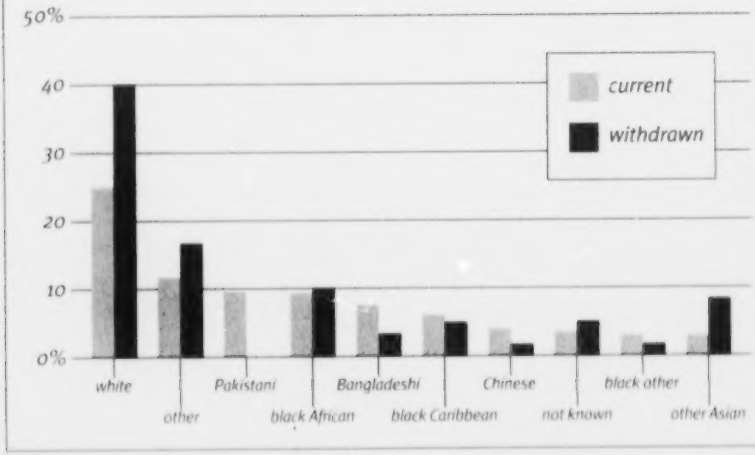


Figure 3 **Profile of current v. withdrawn students by ethnicity**



Appendix F:

Student questionnaire: guidance and progression at 17+

Notes on the completion of the questionnaire

The pro forma provides a framework for you to record the information gathered during your follow-up of early leavers. It is not suggested that the questions / possible responses given in sections 1 and 2 are read out to those being followed up: suggested phrasing for questions is included in the notes below. Please also read the briefing notes, which provide useful advice on developing the process, extracts from which are included below.

1 Introducing the process to the early leaver

Introduction of interviewer: the interviewer using his /her own Christian name is more likely to establish closer contact. The interviewer should check on how the former student wishes to be addressed.

Purpose of the follow-up call / interview: it is important to explain the purpose of the call to the ex-student (e.g. to collect data for our records, to see whether we need to improve the help we offer our students, etc.).

The process: it is important to explain the process briefly at the beginning.

Confidentiality: it is important to reassure the respondent that the data will not be passed to any third party (there may be particular concerns if the respondent is claiming benefits).

You may wish to prepare an agreed script for interviewers to use to explain the above.

2 The questionnaire

Section 1: this relates to the collection of basic data about the students, to be completed in advance of the follow-up calls and interviews: details to be taken from the ISR where available. Additional data about students could be added if there are particular characteristics about your students, which may affect the findings, and help you to interpret these. Data in this section may also prompt additional questions to those you are following up in depth, which could be added to the core questions in section 3.

It is important to know something about the early leavers responding to your follow -up to help you to interpret the findings more accurately (e.g. is it students on a particular programme who are dropping out and not accessing guidance? Is it those from the Asian community who are not aware of the help available?, etc.). This will then allow you to investigate the findings more closely and make more specific recommendations where these are needed. It should also give you enough data to enable you to ascertain whether or not the sample you followed up was representative of the early leavers population within the college.

The ISR also contains a field for 'Reasons for Leaving' – which may or may not be completed – and may or may not be accurate. You will wish to check this out through the call.

Section 2: this section should be completed during the initial follow-up telephone call aimed at collecting basic data on destinations, and ascertaining whether the former students would be prepared to participate in the more in-depth study. It is essentially just five questions and the information on the pro forma is for your use to structure, record and analyse your responses. The conversation with the students is likely to take about five minutes. Where a list of response options is given, such as under 'Reasons for leaving early', there may be multiple responses and all these should be recorded.

Questions need to be phrased in language which is appropriate for the early leaver. Suggested phrasing for the questions is:

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Current status

What have you been doing since leaving college?

Reasons for leaving early

Why did you leave the course?

Qualification profile

Were you asked to pass any exams or achieve any grades to enter the college?
Did you get these?

Current ambition

What are your plans for the future?

Willing to participate in an in-depth study

Would you be prepared to talk to somebody in more detail about what would have helped you on the course when things became difficult? This could either be on the telephone now or at some other time, or you could talk to somebody at . . . on . . .

Colleges may wish to add to this section to collect data of use internally (e.g. more details on employers and type of employment for marketing purposes; to inform curriculum planning or the careers education programme, or to develop college / employer links, etc.). You may also wish to add to the list of reasons for leaving early, if there is a particular feature of your college which is causing concern. The questionnaire needs to be useful to your college! Be careful however not to make it so long that respondents are not prepared to stay on the phone.

The skills of the interviewer will be in interpreting the responses from the early leaver and ticking the appropriate box(es). The interviewer should take a little time to familiarise him / herself with the responses in advance.

A space is provided for recording whether the respondent is prepared to participate in an in-depth follow-up – and how this may be done. Clearly

this needs to be customised according to the process designed for your own institution.

Section 3: this section contains more open questions designed to elicit more qualitative responses. It is designed for use by telephone or through one-to-one interviews.

You may wish to add a small range of options for responses under some of the questions – which will need to be phrased to reflect the information and guidance structures within your own institution. Doing this should make it easier to complete and quicker to analyse if you are dealing with large numbers. One way of doing this is to pilot the questionnaire with a number of early leavers, look at the responses to the questions in section 3 to ascertain the most common, and then re-draft the questionnaire, giving a small range of response options.

The 'reason for leaving' is for information for the interviewer and should be completed from the data recorded in section 2. The suggested sources of help in 'Who helped you?' should be customised to reflect the terms used in your college.

Response rates to postal surveys are usually poor (even with prize draws), and often do not give a balanced response. If however, the questionnaire is used in a postal survey, you should add in the contact name and address to which it should be returned, together with a date by which it should be returned (don't give longer than two weeks maximum, or it will be forgotten). Also enclose an SAE. You may wish to enclose a brief covering letter confirming the purpose of the survey and reassuring on confidentiality / anonymity. If used in a telephone survey or one-to-one interview, you should record the name of the interviewer, nature of the contact and date of the contact.

Jackie Sadler

Section 1 ***Student details (to be taken from the ISR where available)***

Name

Sex ❑ Male ❑ Female

Disability (if any)

Ethnicity

❑ Bangladeshi ❑ Black African
❑ Black Caribbean ❑ Black Other
❑ Chinese ❑ Indian ❑ Pakistani
❑ White ❑ Other – Asian ❑ Other
❑ Not known

Main course / programme of study

Date of application to the college

Who selected the student?

Date of enrolment

Preferred course / programme

Date of departure

GCSE grade profile at entry

Additional support band

Primary learning goal (qualification aimed for)

Mode of study ❑ Full-time ❑ Not full-time

Payment of fees ❑ Fee applicable ❑ No fee / reduced fee

Reason for leaving (if documented)

Section 2 ***Initial telephone follow-up***

Current status

- ❑ Employed
  - ❑ *P/T* ❑ *F/T* ❑ *Self employed*
- ❑ Unemployed
  - ❑ *Seeking work* ❑ *Domestic commitments*
- ❑ Student
  - ❑ *P/T* ❑ *F/T*
  - ❑ *FE* ❑ *HE*
  - ❑ *Other (specify below)*

Programme being followed

Name of institution

❑ Other (specify below)

❑ No response

Give any further details below

Reason(s) for leaving early

- ❑ Started job
  - ❑ *F/T* ❑ *P/T*
- ❑ Personal
  - ❑ *College related* ❑ *Family related*
  - ❑ *S/he didn't make friends* ❑ *Unspecified*
- ❑ Dissatisfied with college
  - ❑ *Did not like college atmosphere /environment*
  - ❑ *College resources /facilities not adequate*
  - ❑ *Did not settle down /feel comfortable in college*
  - ❑ *College social life was poor*

Reason(s) for leaving early *continued*

- ❑ Dissatisfied with course
  - ❑ *Inadequate pre-entry guidance*
  - ❑ *Inadequate induction*
  - ❑ *Misunderstood nature of course*
  - ❑ *Disliked course content*
  - ❑ *Course too hard*
  - ❑ *Changed career aims*
  - ❑ *Not making progress*
  - ❑ *Afraid of not succeeding*
  - ❑ *Teaching /learning styles not appropriate*
  - ❑ *Unhappy with the teaching*
  - ❑ *Inadequate support from tutor*
  - ❑ *Did not get on with staff*
  - ❑ *Did not get on well with other students*
  - ❑ *Moved to more appropriate course*
  - ❑ *Couldn't find enough time to study*
  - ❑ *Needed additional support (specify below)*

- ❑ *Other course related (specify below)*

- ❑ Failed assessment / exam
- ❑ Asked to leave (specify below)

Why?

By whom?

- ❑ Moved away from area
- ❑ Illness (specify below)

Who was ill?

Reason(s) for leaving early ***continued***

- ❑ Lost job / placement
- ❑ Financial reasons
  - ❑ *Withdrawal of benefits (from students)*
  - ❑ *Withdrawal of benefits (from parents)*
  - ❑ *Unaware of all costs of course*
  - ❑ *Lost source of income (specify below)*
  - ❑ *Inadequate planning / budgeting*
  - ❑ *Unsuccessful application to Access fund*
  - ❑ *Grant application unsuccessful*
  - ❑ *Travel costs too high*
  - ❑ *Other finance related (specify below)*
- ❑ Employer withdrew support
- ❑ Journey proved too difficult
- ❑ Other (specify below)
- ❑ No response

Give any further details below

Qualification profile on entry

- ❑ Entry requirements were given
  - ❑ *Yes* ❑ *No*
- ❑ Entry requirements were met
  - ❑ *Yes* ❑ *No*

Current ambition(s)

Interested in return to college? ❑ Yes ❑ No ❑ Undecided ❑ No response

Willing to participate in follow-up? ❑ Yes ❑ No ❑ No response

If yes provide details below

❑ *Telephone (please specify)*

Date Time

❑ *One-to-one (please specify)*

Date Time Venue

Responses recorded by

Date **Additional action**

Section 3. ***In-depth follow-up interview***

Reason for leaving

What help were you given to choose your course before you started?

Who helped you?
- ❑ College guidance specialist staff
- ❑ Tutor
- ❑ Course director
- ❑ Careers service adviser
- ❑ Friend
- ❑ Parent / Guardian
- ❑ Other (specify below)

Did you take a definite decision to leave – or did you just stop coming to college?

Were you aware of the ways in which the college could help you when things became difficult?

❑ Yes ❑ No

If yes, what were these?

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Was any help offered to you before you left the college? ❑ Yes ❑ No

If yes, what was this?

Did this help you make the right move? ❑ Yes ❑ No

In what ways?

If it did not help, why not?

What information and help would you have liked to have been given before you left the college? Please give details below

Was this available? ❑ Yes ❑ No

If so, who helped you?

❑ College guidance specialist staff
❑ Tutor ❑ Course director
❑ Careers service adviser
❑ Friend ❑ Parent / Guardian
❑ Other (please specify)

Was there any other support that the college could have offered you which would have:

- **helped you to succeed on the course you were taking?** ❑ Yes ❑ No
  If yes, please give details below

- **helped to make your next steps easier?** ❑ Yes ❑ No
  If yes, please give details below

What could the college have done differently that would have made you stay?

Data recorded by

Date **Telephone call** **Interview**

Appendix G:

Setting up and managing a process to capture feedback from early leavers

Guidance and progression at 17+

Guidelines for setting up and managing a process to capture feedback from early leavers

1 Consistency and impartiality

In order to obtain accurate feedback from early leavers it is important to ensure that consistency and impartiality are applied in:

- how the process is introduced to the respondent
- who is asked what questions (e.g. only primary sources, or secondary sources as well)
- what is asked
- how the questions are asked
- how the data is recorded.

2 Selecting the interviewer(s)

Bear in mind that the perceived connection between the interviewer and the college may impact on the accuracy of the responses given: from this point of view, follow-up by a party not connected with the college may be most likely to elicit an accurate response. Some colleges have used their careers service for this (but as such a service is not likely to be included in the SLA, it may be charged as an additional cost – you will need to negotiate). College tutors are probably likely to be identified most closely with the institution. Other suggestions from the group for potential interviewers

included other students and telemarketing teams. Whoever is selected, it is important that they state their connection with the college at the outset, and reassure the former student of confidentiality.

Some institutions may wish to have staff who are bi-lingual telephoning specific ethnic groups, particularly if English is not the language spoken at the home.

The skills of the interviewer are very important in being able to:

- encourage responses
- seek further clarification or details in adequate depth where this is required
- handle distress, frustration or anger.

Staff with previous training in guidance / counselling / listening skills may be better placed to undertake this work.

3 *Briefing/training the interviewers*

Whoever is used for interviewing they will need briefing or training beforehand, which will include some of the points in these briefing notes (e.g. confidentiality, purpose of the follow up, how to manage the process, etc.), hints on telephone techniques (e.g. clarity of speech, checking understanding, etc.). Those who are not connected with the college will require more detailed briefing on the college's structures and systems, in order to make sense of the early leavers' responses.

It is useful for staff to have the opportunity for:

- a dry run, in which they can practise going through the questionnaire as a role play: this can also bring to light any misunderstandings about the wording on the questionnaire
- raising any issues about which they are unclear.

The institution may wish to consider and brief interviewers on:

- what response should be given to an early leaver who wishes to complain about the service (including for example the quality of the teaching) experienced at the college

- whether responses from parents, guardians, siblings, etc. are acceptable
- how to respond if a parent or guardian does not know that the student has droped out
- how early leavers' concerns may be fed back into quality systems or link into the complaints procedure at the institution.

A view will need to be taken on whether data from sources other than the former student him / herself is acceptable, (both in relation to ethical principles and the implications for the accuracy of the data) and the staff briefed accordingly. Bear in mind that if in the process of collecting destination data, one wishes to identify early leavers for a qualitative interview, contact with parents, siblings, etc. will not provide this commitment.

If students have had to drop out for financial or domestic reasons this may be a sensitive area, and they may be quite angry: interviewers need to be prepared for this

4 *Selecting the sample*

If you are following up a sample of early leavers, and wish to draw general conclusions from your research about the whole population of early leavers from the college, then it is important to try to select a sample which is as representative of the early leavers population as possible. This may be difficult, given:

- the number of possible variables in the sample (e.g. different programme areas, different ages, different ethnicity, etc.)
- the size of the sample.

but if you know what the characteristics of your early leavers are, you may then be able to select a reasonably representative sample by using the data from the ISR. The larger the size of the sample the easier this will be to do, and the more reliable the resulting findings.

The selected sample needs to be checked to ensure identification of instances where students have been asked to leave by the college.

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The intention is that core data is collected by everyone involved in the project in a common format. Colleges can then add questions appropriate to their institutions if necessary: (for example a college with a high number of students whose first language is not English may wish to investigate whether there was adequate guidance available in their mother tongue – or if this is not available, whether it should be.) Consideration also needs to be given to:

- external requirements to collect data
- the uses to which the findings will be put – and hence the level of detail required by both internal and external audiences
- how the data is to be analysed – for example does the college have an optical mark reader or similar for analysing evaluation data? It might be checking with the quality manager (or equivalent).

The questionnaire is divided into 3 sections:

Section 1: this relates to the collection of basic data about the students, which should be available from the ISR; although in some cases there is concern about the the accuracy of ISR data. However, it will probably turn respondents off if you have to collect all this data when you phone them so it is important to take this from the ISR, and complete section 1 of the questionnaire before phoning. Data in this section may also prompt additional follow-up questions.

It is important to know something about the early leavers responding to your follow-up to help you to interpret the findings more accurately (e.g. is it adults who are dropping out and not accessing guidance? Is it those from the Asian community who are not aware of the help available, etc.). This will then allow you to investigate the findings more closely and make more specific recommendations where these are needed. It should also give you enough data to enable you to ascertain whether or not the sample you followed up was representative of the early leavers population within the college.

The ISR also contains a field for 'Reasons for Leaving' – which may or may not be completed – or may or may not be accurate. You may wish to check any documented reason given when telephoning anyway.

Section 2: this section should be completed during the initial follow-up telephone call aimed at collecting basic data on destinations.

Section 3: this section contains more open questions designed to elicit more qualitative responses. It is designed for use by telephone, through one-to-one interviews or for postal completion. If it is used as part of a postal survey, you should add in the contact name, and address to which it should be returned, together with a date by which it should be returned (don't give longer than two weeks maximum, or it will be forgotten). Also enclose an SAE.

When designing additional questions for the questionnaire, bear in mind:

- the need to make these as clear as possible by using simple language
- that with larger samples, you can save time in aggregating data if you give a limited range of answers to your questions with the catch all of 'other'
- if you are interviewing by phone having options with tick boxes reduces the time required to write down replies.

6 Conducting the interview by phone or one-to-one

Bear in mind issues relating to language, particularly if English is not the first language of your ethnic community groups.

Bear in mind that your respondent will probably wish to move speedily through the questions: ensure that you are organised to avoid long pauses between asking questions whilst you record data. You may wish to use a form of shorthand to record responses, but ensure that this is legible subsequently.

Before telephoning or receiving the early leaver for interview:

- ensure that all necessary items (e.g. diary for logging follow-up calls, pen, paper or computer – if entering directly into a computer, etc.) are at hand, ready for use and switched on if necessary
- ensure that the section on student data is completed and familiarise yourself with this.

In conducting a one-to-one interview, the following needs to be considered:

- where the interviews should be conducted – would it be useful to link to Careers or the Youth Service, rather than hold these in the institution, which the students has left
- how existing opportunities to interview can be exploited
- what procedures need to be followed, what action taken and by whom
- the timing of the interview.

It is often beneficial to maintain consistency of contact between the ex-student and interviewer in a follow up process with more than one stage.

6.1 Introducing the process to the early leaver

Introduction of interviewer: the interviewer using his /her own Christian name is more likely to establish closer contact. The interviewer should check on how the former student wishes to be addressed.

Purpose of the follow-up call / interview: it is important to explain the purpose of the call to the ex-student (e.g. to collect data for our records, to see whether we need to improve the assistance we offer our students, etc.)

The process: it is important to explain the process briefly at the beginning of the outset.

Confidentiality: it is important to reassure the respondent that the data will not be passed to any third party (there may be particular concerns if the respondent is claiming benefits).

You may wish to prepare an agreed script for interviewers to use to explain the above.

6.2 Taking the client through the questionnaire

Go through the questionnaire. Speak clearly and not too fast, without giving any particular words undue emphasis. Ensure that the pronunciation of names is correct and check this with the respondent if necessary.

To ensure consistency, the agreed wording of the questionnaire should not be changed.

Repeat a question if the respondent does not hear it initially.

If one has to seek clarification or further details from the early leaver, ensure that this is not done in any way which is likely to suggest that there is a 'correct' answer. Do not suggest options or ask leading questions.

Remember to :

- agree any subsequent action (e.g. postal questionnaire to be sent; date, time and time of follow-up interview, etc.) and log this immediately
- ensure that the staff responsibilities for ensuring that early leavers attend one-to-one interviews, or are followed up by phone or post are clear and there is a system in place to ensure that the necessary action is taken (e.g. booking rooms, sending maps / letters confirming the appointment, etc.)
- thank the respondent at the end of the call or the one-to-one interview.

7 Corrective action

Any difficulties, which are encountered in the process and not clarified by the guidelines should be recorded at the time and reported to the individual responsible for overseeing the process, in order to make any changes as quickly as possible.

Jackie Sadler
October 1996

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Appendix H:

Checklist for collecting and using destinations data to improve guidance and support

The following checklist is based on the recommendations and actions of the project colleges. It is designed to help colleges in reviewing their present systems for collecting destinations data and to consider actions they might take as a result.

Where practice is effective, colleges:

Collection and use of data

- have a clear and common understanding of what information is to be collected and how it will be used
- have clear systems for the collection and analysis of destinations data and of information collected from follow-up interviews with students
- review existing interlinking systems such as ISR and ROA to streamline these where appropriate and ensure that information is only collected once
- ensure effective liaison between staff involved in student data collection and updating to avoid duplication of effort (MIS staff, registry, Student Services, tutors)
- tap into information collected on their students by other agencies (Careers Service, TECs) or negotiating sharing student data.

- identify students who are 'at risk' at an early stage and monitor their progress more closely
- have a systematic college-wide approach to the follow-up of non-attenders so that early intervention can be made
- consider enhancing existing support through mentoring and buddy schemes
- establish consistent and high quality guidance and admissions procedures that ensure that students are enrolled onto the most appropriate programme
- make sure that staff involved in pre-entry, entry and on-programme guidance are trained to a high standard in terms of both knowledge and skills
- be rigorous in establishing and using minimum entry criteria
- consider, in particular, establishing minimum entry criteria or building in additional support for Level 2 programmes
- ensure there are high quality induction programmes with opportunities to 're-route' students where appropriate
- ensure that late enrollers are properly inducted and appropriately supported to enable them to catch up missed work
- assure the quality of tutorial support through training and continued support for tutors
- develop tutorial programmes that are 'achievement focused' rather than simply 'pastoral focused'
- offer early, comprehensive careers education and guidance to students on one-year programmes to given them the opportunity to consider progression routes open to them
- ensure there are clear procedures and impartial guidance for students wanting to change programme
- ensure there are simple and transparent complaints procedures which students are aware of and can use
- ensure students know how to proceed, and from whom they may seek advice and guidance, if they are considering withdrawing from their programme.

Curriculum change

- concentrate the individual student's time in college and reduce long periods of 'unguided' college time as extended periods of 'unguided' college time can precipitate absence and lead to drop-out
- provide an adequate range of pre-foundation and foundation level programmes to ensure the needs of students with poorer basic skills and lower achievement are met
- actualise the mythical flexible college so that students can undertake part-time work andstudentswho are offered employment can continue their studies and achieve qualifications
- consider a range of methods of offering accessible additional learning support to those who need it: identifying needs and offering support early; re-designing programmes; providing pre-course additional support.
- consider how students of 17 on 16-hour programmes can be encouraged to devote sufficient time to study
- take steps to assure the quality of teaching and learning and tutoring.

Closing the loop

Colleges need to ensure that appropriate staff are aware of the range of information available, and that there are systems for feeding this back to them so that the quality of provision can be improved.

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- using destinations data to inform and improve guidance and support.

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